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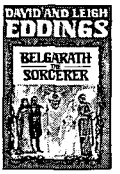

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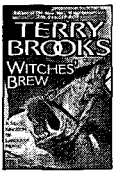

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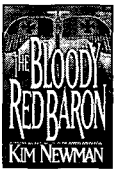

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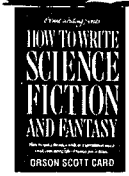

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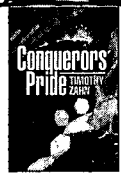

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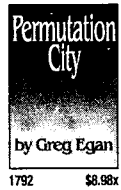

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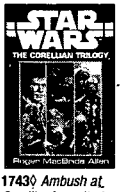

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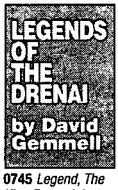

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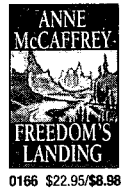

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

MY HUSBAND collects books.

When I first met him, I didn't understand this practice of buying books as an investment, the quest for the rarest Dell Mapback, or the search for a pristine copy of *A Dying Earth*. To me, books were valuable not for the scarcity of the print run but because of the stories held inside. My philosophy was simple: If I liked the story, I kept the book. If I didn't, I traded the book in at the nearest used bookstore, and tried again.

My philosophy has changed over the last nine years. I have learned that the collector's mentality is more complex than I gave it credit for. Good collectors only collect things they enjoy. Therefore, my husband values his books for their rarity, and for their stories.

I still don't collect books, although I must admit to a collector's mentality in other areas. Somehow my parts of the house have filled with art, movie memorabilia and...ah, well, um...stuffed animals. I like my husband's book collection because it makes me feel as if I'm living in a library, and I know, even if we stop buying books tomorrow, I will have enough to read until the day I die.

But I hadn't really thought about the books and what they meant until this month. We're moving to a new house in a new town (and the magazine is coming with us — see the contents page for the new editorial address), and as I pack my share of these thousands of books, I find myself reading the back covers, first chapters, and in some cases, the whole book.

Most of the books we own predate me, but about a third were published in the last twenty-five years. A couple hundred were published since 1991. And I realized, as I pack *Jaguar* by Bill Ransom (which I've been planning to read since it came out), and *Nobody's Son* by Sean Stewart (which has been on my bedside table since last winter), that most of these recent books have not been reviewed by *F&SF*.

Now, this was not a bolt-from-the-blue realization. Several publishers have mentioned to me that *F&SF*

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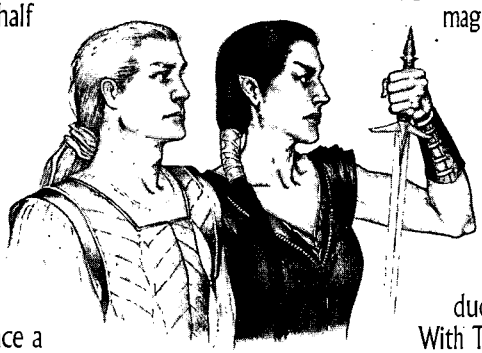

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used to review more books than we do now. Authors send us more review copies in one month than we can handle in one year. Our readers have stated a preference for in-depth book essays *combined with* book guidance. And I have floundered for a way to meet the demand for more books to be reviewed without reducing the space for short fiction.

The solution was so simple that I didn't see it until I held book after unread book in my hands. We are going to do short, impersonal reviews. A book guide, if you will, compiled by the *F&SF* staff.

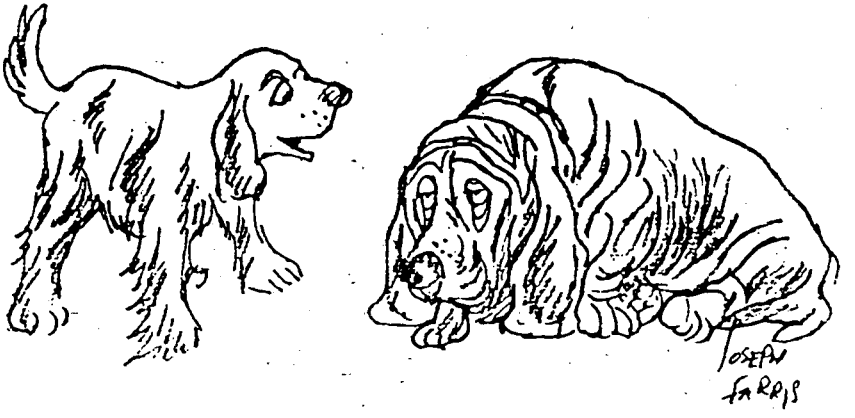
We still won't be able to cover every science fiction and fantasy book published, but we will review more books than we have in years. We will keep our regular reviewers[1] because their essays keep us talking about the growth, changes, and direction in the fields of science fiction and fantasy. But we add to them staff members who can give reliable advice about which books to buy.

It won't help you expand your collection of Louis L'Amour first editions, but it will help you determine which of the fifteen books you bought last month to read first.

The new column appears behind Charles de Lint's "Books to Look For." We hope you enjoy it.

You also note that the science column isn't really a science column this month. We've excerpted bits from Stanley Asimov's new book, a collection of letters written by his brother Isaac. The science columns will return as usual next month.

[1] Although we may occasionally give them a month off so that they can do things like move, meet a book deadline — or read (heaven forbid!) something other than Science Fiction.



"Have you considered a face lift?"

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman's second solo novel, The Silent Strength of Stones, *just appeared from AvoNova books. Her first,* The Thread that Binds the Bones, *won the Bram Stoker Award in 1994.*

Nina is one of our most popular writers. "Home For Christmas" (January, 1995), her first story for this magazine about the magical woman Matt, generated more mail than any other story we've published in the last five years. It also increased the sales of her novella about Matt, Unmasking, *published by Pulphouse Publishing. Nina says Matt's story is just beginning, and to prove it, she has written "Here We Come A-Wandering," a very different tale about Matt and Christmastime.*

Here We Come A-Wandering

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

MATT MET THE MOSS MAN on Christmas Eve.

She was sitting on a stone bench in a pioneer cemetery, a wall of ivy-covered brick at her back, and a brown paper bag full of past-their-expiration-date cellophane-wrapped sandwiches beside her. The short cool daylight was fading, mist breeding in the low spots and spreading. The damp in the air smelled like winter, dead leaves, iced water, chill and no comfort. Matt was glad of her thick olive-drab army jacket.

She liked the look of the old mossy gravestones, some tilted and some broken, but all mute against the wet grass and vanishing distance. The people who had come here to commune with the dead had all died, too; no fresh dreams troubled the stillness. This was as close to nature as she liked to get, a tamed wilderness only a short walk away from a town where she could go to find warmth and comfort after she had had her supper.

She unwrapped one of the sandwiches and sniffed it. Roast beef and yellow cheese. It smelled fine. She took a sample bite, waited to see if her

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stomach would tell her anything, and then ate the rest of the sandwich. The bread was dry and the edges of the cheese hard, but it was better than a lot of other things she had eaten.

Her stomach thanked her. She opened another sandwich, ham and swiss, tested it, and ate it.

She was sitting and feeling her own comfort when she noticed there was some dreaming going on to her left, a quiet swirl of leafy images emerging from the layers-thick ivy on the wall. She wondered if she were seeing the dream of a plant. She had never seen a plant dream before. This seemed like a strange time to start seeing them. She turned to get a better look at the dream, and it changed. The leaves wove together into green skin, the skin smoothed and formed a man, and then a man all green stepped away from the wall, shaking his head slowly.

Some texture in the sound and smell of him told her he was no dream at all.

Matt grabbed the loose cellophane on the bench beside her and asked it if it would cover the man's face if she threw it. It said yes. If he came at her...she touched the bench she was sitting on. It was too old and sleepy to mobilize. She put her feet on the ground and tensed to run.

The man blinked. His face looked like a mannequin's, no real expression, no movement of the tiny muscles, a polished and unreal perfection to the features. He turned and stared at her.

"Who are you?" she asked after the silence had stretched.

"Edmund," he said.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing? Why'd you move if you don't want anything? You could have just stayed in the wall." She had never met anybody who wanted nothing. She wondered if he were lying.

"It was time to move," he said. Something was happening to his skin in the waning light, the green fading, leaving tan behind. His clothes and curly hair stayed green. She hadn't noticed the clothes until the rest of him changed. T-shirt, pants — green, mossy even; bare arms and face, hands and feet. And it was freezing, but he didn't look as though he felt the cold.

"Want a sandwich?" she said.

He stretched and yawned. He came closer. She had thought his expression was wooden, but now she saw it was more like ice, frozen...though thaw

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was coming. He blinked. He finally smiled. It changed her image of him completely: he looked friendly and almost goofy.

Still gripping the cellophane just in case, she scooted over, leaving room on the bench. He sat down.

She peered into the brown paper bag. "Looks like I got a tuna and a ham-and-cheese left. The tuna might be bad. Fish goes bad faster than cured meat."

"I'll try the ham-and-cheese," he said. "Thanks."

She gave him the sandwich. He struggled with the cellophane for a minute. She grabbed it back and unwrapped it for him. "How long you been part of a wall, anyway?"

"I don't know," he said. "I wonder if my car will run." He bit the sandwich and chewed, abstracted, as though he were listening to his mouth. "Hmm."

"It's Christmas Eve," Matt said when he had finished the sandwich and sat watching her, smiling faintly.

"Huh," he said. "Been a wall a couple months then, I guess. I'm not sure."

She peeked at his mental landscape. A forest clearing, with a single tree rising from the center, sunlight stroking one side of its trunk. Wind blew and the tree leaned into it as though its bark were skin, its core supple.

Not threatening, but not clear, either. "What were you doing in the wall?"

"Standing still."

"How come?"

"That's how the spirit moved me."

"Huh?"

He shrugged. "I just wander around until something tells me to act. I happened to stop here a while back, and the wall spoke to me."

Matt felt a stir inside. She had been talking with human-made things for years. She'd never met someone else who talked with them.

"What did it say?"

"'Come here.'"

She glanced back at the wall under its cloak of ivy. —Did you say "come here" to this guy?— she asked it.

—Yes,— said the wall.

—Why?—

—I wanted him.—

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Nothing ever seemed to want Matt, though lots of things enjoyed meeting her, and most of them were nice to her. —Why?—

—He's a certain kind of brick. He's hot. He makes everything fit better.—

Matt looked at Edmund. His eyebrows were up.

"You're a brick?" she said.

"A brick," he repeated, with a question in it.

"Wall says you're a brick. A hot brick."

"What?" He glanced at the wall. He reached out and placed his palm flat against it.

Seemed like he hadn't heard her conversation, then. Matt felt better. She had been talking to everything for a long time without other human beings hearing her. She wasn't sure how she would feel about being overheard.

His arm stained brick red.

—What's he doing?— Matt asked the wall.

—Connecting,— the wall said. —Are you talking to me?— Its voice had changed slightly.

—Am I?— Matt looked at Edmund. His mouth opened slightly, and his eyebrows stayed up.

—Yes,— said the wall. "Yes," said Edmund.

Matt swallowed. —This is so strange.—

—Yes.—

Slowly he pulled his hand away from the wall. His skin faded to tan again. He held his hand out to Matt. She stared at it without touching it.

"What do you want?" he asked her. "What do you need?"

"Me? I don't need anything," she said.

"I'm here for you."

"What?"

He dropped his hand to his thigh. "I follow as the spirit leads me," he said. "It led me to you. Let me know when you figure out what you want."

"I take care of myself," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"I don't need anything else."

"All right."

"What do you want?" she asked him again.

He smiled wide. "Nothing," he said again. "Guess that makes us a match."

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"I don't turn into a brick," said Matt, unnerved. She hadn't realized until this moment how much she valued being different and special, even if no one else knew just how special. She knew, and that had been enough, until now. She didn't want this man to be anything like her.

He said, "Would you like to be a brick? I like it. It's nice being a part of something so solid."

"No." Matt shook her head. "No, no."

"Okay," he said. He pulled his legs up, bent knees against his chest, and gripped his feet.

She watched him for a while. His feet and hands started to gray to match the stone bench, and then the dark was too heavy for her to make out details. "Uh," she said. "I'm going back to town now. Nice meeting you."

"I'll come with you."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Oh. All right. Thanks for the sandwich."

"You're welcome." She stood and walked away quickly, chasing mist whenever she could.

SHE FOUND a newspaper in a phone booth and scanned the page of church services, then picked an early one to go to. She liked churches on Christmas Eve, the pageantry, the carols, the candles and greenery, the warmth, the smells of hot wax and pine and incense and perfume and even mothballs from some of the fancy clothes people wore. She liked the idea that a kid born in a cave could be important.

She settled in a back pew and watched everything with interest. Children thought about presents, those opened and those still waiting, full of promises. Some of the grown-ups did too. Some people were thinking about the service, and some were thinking about going to sleep. Some were remembering their dinners. Some were worried because they hadn't finished wrapping things or they hadn't found the right presents, and others were happy because they had done what they could.

A woman in front of Matt kept thinking about washing a mountain of dishes. She would sigh, and start the task in her mind again, go through it dish by dish, each spoon and fork and knife; and sigh, and start again. Matt tuned her out and focused on a child who was watching the candles and listening

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to the singing and thinking about the words of the songs and making the flames go in and out of focus, flames, flat disks of light, flames. A child in another place looked at every scrap of red clothing, hoping to glimpse Santa Claus. A man cradled a sleeping child. When he looked down at her he saw his arms full of golden light. Another child looked at the priest and saw angels behind him. Matt wondered if maybe the angels were really there. They had beautiful smiles and kind eyes.

The church was full. It lived and breathed, a big organism full of different cells and tissues, everything cooperating.

Matt kept an eye out for the moss man. What did he want from her? He wasn't a normal human. She couldn't guess which way he'd jump.

She didn't see him again until she left the church. She was walking through a quiet neighborhood talking to houses she passed, asking if any of them would like some extra company tonight, and listening to their stories about the festivities they had hosted, the lighted trees they held inside, the way their humans had dressed them in jewelry of lights, when an old rust-blotched station wagon pulled up beside her, its engine surprisingly quiet considering its exterior, and Edmund leaned along the seat and said out the rolled-down passenger-side window, "Want a ride?"

"What?" she said.

"Want a ride?"

"No," she said, wondering if she should run.

He pulled the car over to the curb and turned off the engine. "Want company?" he said, climbing out. He had shoes and a coat on now.

—What's with this guy?— she asked the car.

—He won't hurt you,— the car said. Its voice was gentle and warm and somehow feminine.

—Do you know what hurts?—

—Yes,— said the car. —At least I know some of the things that hurt people. Edmund won't hurt you.—

"What do you want?" Matt asked Edmund for the third time.

He rounded the front of the car and stood near her. "I want to walk around with you. I want to take your hand. I want to make sure you're warm enough tonight, and safe."

"Why?"

"Because that's where the spirit is leading me."

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She reached out her gloved hand and he took it, his own warm through the leather of her glove, his grip firm without being threatening. "Thank you," he said.

"I don't get it," she muttered.

"That's okay." He moved to stand beside her, still holding her hand, and said, "Would you like to walk?"

"All right."

They walked without speaking for a while. Matt watched the way their breaths misted in front of them, and the way the real mist globed around the orange streetlights, as though fires floated on air, or small clumsy stars dipped low. He was tall beside her, his hand warm in hers, his footsteps almost silent. It took a while for her defenses to gentle down, and then she realized that it felt good to walk with another person. She couldn't remember the last time she had done it like this — if ever.

"Sometimes I feel like I might just float away," he said presently. "I have a sister. I visit her once in a while. It keeps my feet on the ground."

"I saw my sister last spring." Matt had talked to her sister last Christmas for the first time in years. In the spring Matt had hitchhiked across the top of the country from Ohio to Seattle, catching rides sometimes from people and sometimes from friendly trucks, who opened their back doors to her at truckstops and let her out at other truckstops when they were about to turn away from her route.

Seeing Pam had been strange and difficult. Matt and her sister had started out from the same place and gone such different directions that they had almost no common ground left. Pam and her husband had offered Matt a room to stay in and help finding a job. Matt fixed the broken dishwasher and repaired a reluctant vacuum cleaner and a tired clothes dryer, and then she had hugged Pam and left.

"Mostly I just wander from one place to the next," said Edmund, "waiting to be needed for something, then trying to figure out what it is."

Matt wandered too, always looking at things. Sometimes she helped people, but she didn't go around looking for people to help. "What about what you want?"

"I don't know," he said. They walked farther. "I used to do what I wanted, until I started getting mean, and wanting things other people cherished. Scared me. Wasn't the person I wanted to be. So I decided to try the opposite."

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"And things want you?"

He nodded. "Sometimes it's nothing urgent. The cemetery wall had been falling to pieces for ages, for instance, and it could have gone on disintegrating without disturbing the integrity of the local space-time continuum." He grinned and she looked up at him. "I know, I can't believe I talk like that either. Especially when I'm not used to talking at all. But that wall wanted to be pulled back together. I wasn't busy with anything else, so I kind of melted in and helped the wall collect itself and strengthen its bonds with its pieces. Then just as I finished, there you were."

"What makes you think I'm your next project?"

"That's the way the spirit usually works, I guess. I finish one task and then comes another."

"So what are you supposed to do about me?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Maybe nothing. I know you don't need me or anybody."

She stopped in the darkness between streetlights and stared across the street at a house draped with colored blinking lights, realizing that the lights blurred because her eyes had heated with tears. Something inside her tremored, small shakes at first, then working their way outward to her edges and turning into big shakes.

"What is it?" he murmured.

"I — " She gripped his hand harder.

He stood beside her as she shook, and then he stepped closer and slid his arms around her. She held onto him, pressed her face into his chest, smelled his strange wood-smoke and spring skies scent, and felt the choke of sobs welling up in her throat. She fought them back down, wanting to not cry in front of this stranger or against this stranger or anywhere near this stranger. She held it all in. She had not cried in a thousand years. Especially not where anyone else could hear.

He stroked her back, a gentle rub up and down of his hand over her shoulder blade. He was warm and smelled like fire.

—What? What are you doing to me?— she cried without voice.

—Just waiting,— he said.

—Stop pushing!— she screamed.

He stood quiet, his arms still embracing her, without force. She knew she could free herself with a step backward. He did not move except for the slow

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exhalations and inhalations she could feel and hear beneath her cheek and ear, and the faint bumping of his heart.

—Just waiting,— he said.

Something was pushing. Something inside her. It pushed up from her chest into her throat. It hurt! Her head felt fever-hot. Then a sob broke out of her, and another, and then they were coming out, wave after wave, and the hot heavy pushing thing eased. She shook and cried, loud gulping embarrassing sobs, her nose running, her throat bobbing open and shut, and he stood quiet and just held her.

Once she stopped trying to stop herself from crying she felt much better; she just let the sobs and tears and snot come out however they seemed to want to. Inside her crying, she lost track of everything else, another luxury she hadn't had in all these recent years of hyperawareness of everything around her. She worried because she didn't know how to stop crying, but somehow she let that worry rise and fade like the others.

When at last the sobs died away and all her impulse to cry was gone, she couldn't understand where she was. She was warm straight through, and lying on something hard but not flat, more bumpy and falling away at the sides. She felt as limp as an overcooked noodle. She lifted her head. There wasn't much light, but she could make out a face below her, peaceful, sleeping, smooth as a statue's face. Arms around her. A blanket over her? She wasn't sure about that part. She felt warm all over.

She listened to their breathing and realized they were someplace small.

Her arms were down at her sides. She sneaked them up until she could push away from what she was lying on. The arms around her fell away. She looked down into the face, and realized it was that guy, Edmund, realized that yes, she was lying on him, on top of a guy, something she hadn't done on purpose since the zoned years. His eyes opened. He looked at her, his face serene.

"You okay?" he asked.

She rubbed her nose on her sleeve. "I don't know. What happened? Where are we?" She looked around. They were in a small enclosed space, but she could see windows now. Car windows, all steamed over.

"We're in my car. I have a futon in the back where I sleep sometimes. It seemed like a better place for crying than the middle of the sidewalk on a freezing night."

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"Let me out." She scrambled off of him and crawled over to one of the doors, frantically searching for a handle, finding one, pressing, pulling, twisting. Trapped. Everything in her screamed panic.

He was beside her. He edged his hand under hers and opened the door, and she fell out into the street. She jumped up and ran.

A block. She turned a corner. She scanned for a hiding place, saw a low fence and a dense tree, jumped the fence, hid inside the shadow the tree's branches cast. She slowed her breath and tried to catch up to herself.

Nothing followed her.

Usually she found a refuge for the night in something human-built that welcomed her, someplace warm, but tonight she curled up on the cool damp ground in the treeshadow, stilled her mind, and searched out sleep.

She lay hugging her knees to her chest for a long while, her knit cap pulled down over her ears. Her neck was cold, and her ear, with only a layer of cloth to protect it from the earth, was freezing. Cold air inched up her pantlegs past her thick socks. Usually she could shut those sensations off one by one and feel comfortable and safe, and then she could sleep.

Tonight she felt strange. Her head felt floaty. Lightness was all through her, as though she had taken an unfamiliar drug. The cold, which she knew from broad experience wasn't enough to kill her, kept telling her it was there. She put her gloved hands up around her neck. The smooth outsides of her gloves were cold against her bare skin, and woke her more than cold air had.

She sighed and sat up. She did her best to take good care of herself. She loved her life, even though some of it was difficult. She wanted to be warm.

She remembered how warm she had been inside Edmund's car, and how strange that warmth had felt. His arms around her, not tight, but enough to let her know she was being held. She thought of being his project and didn't like that at all. Who was his spirit, to decide that he should work on her? She knew that everything had spirit — she talked to the spirit in many things — but she had never felt like spirit was ordering her around, making her decisions for her. Maybe Edmund was deluded. Maybe his spirit only applied to him.

Even if he was deluded, he had been nice to her.

She stretched and edged out from under the sheltering branches. She crossed the lawn, hopped the fence, and knelt on the sidewalk. She pulled off her glove and touched the cold cement. —Edmund?— she asked it. —Moss man?—

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—No,— said the sidewalk.

—Do you know the one I'm talking about? Do you know where he is?—

—I'll ask.—

The thread of question rippled out around her. She sat down, waiting while cold seeped through the seat of her jeans. She had asked long-distance questions before, and gotten answers. She wasn't sure how the sidewalk would recognize Edmund when it found him, though.

The mist made the night seem quiet, almost dead. Porchlights and Chrismas lights and streetlights blurred and hazed only a short way from her. She reached out and touched the fence beside her to make sure it was still there.

She couldn't even hear his steps, but she saw him come out of the mist. He knelt in front of her and smiled gently. "Hi."

She opened her arms and he edged forward and scooped her up, then rose to his feet. Carrying her, he walked for a while. She clung to him, for a moment trying to remember the last time she had been carried, had reached for the one carrying her, had leaned against his warmth and felt so safe and strange. Her mind blanked. She didn't need to know.

He stopped, and loosed one of his arms to reach for the back door of his car. It opened without sound. He leaned and set her on the mattress. It was warm. The inside of his car smelled like mountain pine and desert sagebrush. She crawled into the shadowy hollow and he came in after her, pulling the door shut behind him.

She crept up toward the front of the car and leaned against the back of the passenger seat, tucked hat and gloves into her pockets and waited for the warmth to thaw her edges.

"Thirsty?" he asked after a little while.

"Guess I am."

He opened what looked like a dark box and pulled out an oblong something that gurgled, then edged closer to her and held it out.

"What is it?"

"Water."

She reached out. Her hand touched his. "You're so warm," she whispered. "How do you stay so warm?"

"Spirit," he said. He shifted the bottle until she got a grip on it.

She screwed the cap off and sipped cool fresh water. "Thanks."

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"You're welcome. I'm glad you called."

"Why?" She drank more water, then capped the bottle and handed it back to him.

"I wanted to see you again."

"Why?"

"I don't know." He sounded frustrated. "I don't know. I need — I don't know what it is, but I need something."

"You need something from me? I thought spirit gave you everything."

"I thought it did too, until you left." He was quiet for a while. "There's an ache inside me now that wasn't there before."

"Oh, no. No." She remembered the void that opened within her sometimes when she left behind people she had liked. Often they invited her to stay. They showed her how she could live and be with them. She found comfort and friendship and warmth and a future, soil ripe for roots. The instant she thought of staying anyplace longer than four or five weeks, though, panic burned through her. The bottoms of her feet itched until she moved on. Distant roads called and carried her away.

Once the miles were behind her she remembered how nice the places and people had been. She yearned for them. She mourned lost moments, orange marmalade on English muffins on someone's back porch on a summer morning, an old man reciting Robert Service poetry beside a crackling fire late one winter night, rubbing shoulders with a pack of wild dirty kids as they all hid in a hayloft together and watched confused grown-ups running below, sitting alone on grass and watching peoples' dreams during a concert of classical music in a park, stadium fireworks with an older couple one Fourth of July. Losing them hurt. But she never went back.

"You say no, but the ache is still there," Edmund murmured.

"I'm sorry." She reached for his hand. Held it. His fingers were warm, and gripped hers back.

"You feel it."

"Yeah," she whispered. "But I don't know what to do about it."

He slid closer to her, let go of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders. Feeling strange, she leaned against his chest. She pushed her hand down between the futon and the side of the car. —What does he want? What does he need?— she asked the car, since Edmund had never given her a straight answer.

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—He needs four flat tires and no spare,— the car said.

"What!" A laugh startled out of her.

"What?" Edmund asked.

"Car says you need four flats and no spare."

He didn't say anything for a little while. Finally, he said, "Maybe I do. Do you ever feel like that's what you need?"

She shook her head. "No. No. I'd go crazy if I was stuck in one place."

"Are you sure?"

Yes. "No."

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe it's time I stopped following the spirit around. The spirit's all over the place anyway. Maybe I'll stay here for a while."

"Here? A little three-syllable town in the middle of nowhere?"

"Why'd you come here if you thought that?"

"Because there's always something new and interesting everywhere I go."

"Yes," he said. "Here there's a wildlife preserve that needs some preserving. I saw it this evening after we split up. Earth that needs revitalizing, water that wants unpoisoning, plants that need encouragement, animals that need better cover and more things to eat. I could work on that." He paused, then said, "Why don't you help me?"

"I don't do stuff like that." There was nothing she could talk to in a landscape like that, except maybe Edmund. She got along very well with appliances and machines; plants and animals were total mysteries.

"What do *you* want to do?"

"Right now, or tomorrow?"

"Right now."

"Go to sleep, I guess."

He laughed; she could feel it and hear it. "Merry Christmas," he said. He gripped her shoulders gently and edged her over, then eased her down onto the mattress so she was lying on her back, and she let him do it. He leaned and reached for something toward the back of the car, pulled it up over them — it was a quilt — and lay down beside her.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered.

During the zoned years she had awakened next to strange men as often as not, her head full of hangover, her body marked with bruises she couldn't remember how she had gotten, her psyche battered with scratches and aches

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that she would drink away before the next night fell. That was before things talked to her. Back then, even when people talked to her she mostly didn't care or understand what they were talking about. The important thing was to get as close to drowning as she could, because that was where oblivion lay. Everything else hurt too much.

This was the first time in the unzoned years that she opened her eyes from sleep to morning light and looked into a man's face so near hers. His eyes were closed. His breathing was slow and deep and smelled like mint.

It was also the first time she had gotten a really good look at his face. He looked...beautiful.

Pretty much everything looked beautiful if you studied it long enough, but he looked beautiful at first glance: clear tanned skin over clean planes of cheek and jawbone, straight narrow nose, heavy domed eyelids fringed with dark lashes, neat dark arched brows, a high clean forehead, brown curls touched with gold. His mouth smiled in his sleep.

One eye opened, the other squinting shut. His eye was green. "Hi."

"Hi," she said, and looked away. He was warm and near, but not touching.

"Did you dream?"

"I don't remember. Did you?"

"Yeah. I dreamed about when I was a kid."

"A different life," said Matt. Her mother had taken her shopping for dresses for the junior prom. "Try this one, Matilda." Matt had tried a lot of them, and every one produced a stranger in the mirror, a young woman with wavy shoulder-length brown hair and shaved legs and armpits, and sparkles down her front. She had looked at herself and wondered what her future would be. Would there be a prince? Would there be a glamorous job? College? Parties? Adventures?

Never in a million years had she imagined this future.

"Yes. How did you know?" Edmund sat up and stretched, his hands flattening against the roof of the car. Matt sat up, too, and turned to sit cross-legged, facing him. He said, "Before this happened to me and I had to figure out what to do about it, I had three friends. We did stuff every afternoon after school, dumb stuff like going over to someone's house and watching cartoons and eating sugar cereal straight out of the box, or riding our bikes down hills like idiots, just for the rush of wondering whether we'd be able to brake before

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hitting something at the bottom. We'd spend whole afternoons gluing little model airplane parts into planes. I wonder who my friends turned into. I haven't thought of them in a long time."

"You probably wouldn't know them now."

He smiled. "I think I'd know them. We were really good friends."

"Would they know you?" Matt remembered knocking on her sister's door in Seattle, having a man answer. His face had shuttered over right away. Matt had understood. It had been three states since she had been to a Laundromat, but only a few miles from the barber where she had gotten her head shaved; her last ride had been in the back of an onion truck. She had a black plastic garbage bag containing her belongings over her shoulder. Her army jacket was a map of her encounters with various kinds of dirt and grease. There were holes in her shoes.

"What is it?" the man had said in an almost kind voice.

"Is Pam home?"

"Just a minute." He closed the door. It had opened a few minutes later to reveal a heavy, long-haired woman who wore blue-rimmed glasses, and a long green dress that made her look like a queen.

"Pam?" Matt had said.

"Mattie? Is that you? Oh, Mattie!" Her sister swept her up into an embrace...just the way Edmund had picked her up last night. Warmth, comfort, and safety. With Pammy it had only lasted a little while. There had been too many questions afterward.

"I don't know if they'd know me," said Edmund. His smile widened. "Might be fun to find out."

"What about your preserve?"

"Maybe it's time to take a break from spirit work." A moment after he said that, his eyes widened, and he looked around at his car, at her, at the ceiling, as if waiting for a sign or a blow. Nothing happened.

"It would be hard to stop being a priest and then start again," Matt said. "Wouldn't it?"

"I don't want to stop." He sat still for a moment, staring beyond her shoulder, a worry dent between his brows. "I would try to stay in that state where I'm sensitive to signs of what needs or wants doing. But I would pick my path for a change, instead of drifting. I would ask questions because I want to know the answers, instead of to find out what I should do next. Is that all

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right?" He looked at the roof, at the steamed-over and frosted windows, toward the front of the car — Matt glanced forward too, and saw that the dashboard of the car was covered with dried leaves, curved driftwood, feathers, moss, acorns and seed pods, sea shells, egg shells from wild birds, a sand dollar, a twisted silver gum wrapper, a religious medal, small rocks, some smooth and some sharp-edged, the shed skin of a snake...

The shed skin of a snake rose into the air.

Matt hugged herself.

The skin drifted over the front seats and came to wind itself around Edmund's wrist, clinging for a moment before dropping off.

"Thanks," he said, picking up the skin and pressing it against his cheek.

"That's a yes?" asked Matt.

He smiled. "Change and growth. Merry Christmas."

"So you're going to go find your friends?"

"Yeah."

What if he found them and they didn't recognize or remember him? What if he found them and they didn't like him? What if he had changed so much they were scared of him? When she looked at him and thought of him stepping out of the wall of ivy, it was hard to connect him with a boy who watched cartoons and ate sugar cereal. What if he and his friends had no places where their edges met anymore? What if he were heading for disappointment, all on a bright winter's morning?

He was a grown man and a magician or something. He'd been on his own for years, the same way she had. He could take care of himself.

She thought of how the crying had pushed up out of her last night, a lost river from somewhere inside, dammed for who knew how long, and how Edmund had waited by the waterfall, not asking questions or making demands or talking or judging or anything. What if he had a river like that inside him? Had he ever had someone to stand by while he let it out? Maybe his spirit took care of things like that, but maybe not. A spirit that sent you a snakeskin wasn't the same as somebody's arms around you when you were cold and sad.

"Can I come?" she said.

His smile widened. "That would be great."

That would be crazy. She'd never asked a question like that before. What did she think, she could help him?

Maybe she could.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Reservation Blues, by Sherman Alexie, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995, 306pp, $21.00, Hardcover

SO IT SEEMS Robert Johnson didn't die in 1938 after all. (And if you don't know who Johnson is, shame on you, and I'll be expecting to see you in Blues 101 next semester.) Instead, he faked his death and spent the years between then and now trying to find a way to get rid of that cursed guitar of his — the symbol of the deal he struck with the devil at a crossroads one midnight.

Reservation Blues opens with Johnson showing up at the Spokane Reservation also featured in Sherman Alexie's last book, the short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. The only person who'll talk to him is Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a storyteller that nobody wants to listen to because they've heard his stories too many times before. Thomas sends Johnson off to see Big Mom, a kind of earth spirit who lives up on a nearby mountain, and Johnson leaves Thomas his guitar. Next thing you know, the guitar's talking to Thomas and he's starting this band called Coyote Springs and *Reservation Blues* is well on its way.

Like many Native writers, Alexie mixes myth, history, humor and a dark undercurrent of sadness in his writing. There's no romanticizing of life on the reservation, but it's not all hard times either. The characters can have great spirit, but also great failings, and he explores both with a clear eye so that in the end he's telling stories about people rather than symbols. Their history, their personal pasts, the mythology of their culture are alive for them, but what turns the wheel is what they do with the hand they've been dealt, rather than what's been done to them.

Along the way Alexie also has a few things to say about the rock and

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roll business, the closed-mindedness of people off the reservation (and on it), and he takes a few pot shots at that other "Native" tribe — the Wannabes (because they wanna be Indians), found here in the guise of a pair of white woman festooned with Native jewelry who form a more successful "Native" band than the all-Indian Coyote Springs.

The members of Coyote Springs are looking for fame and fortune when they start their band — much like Robert Johnson did when he sold his soul to the devil. What each of them finds, instead, is only what they were trying to run away from in the first place: themselves. How they deal with their problems this time around depends on what they've learned so far in their lives — just as we all have to do in the stories shape our own.

There's real muscle in Alexie's prose. He has an eye for detail, and an ability to range from the crass to the lyric, depending on the needs of the story and the voices of the characters. But more importantly, he writes with great heart and has that enviable ability of delineating universal touchstones through the spill of common events that make up the lives of his characters.

And oh yes. He also lets us in on what eventually happened when Johnson met Big Mom, up on that mountaintop.

Slow Funeral, by Rebecca Ore, Tor, 1995, 314pp, $4.99, Paperback

Slow Funeral has much the same premise as Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* which we discussed in last month's column — reluctant witches who must eventually face up to their heritage — though they approach their themes for entirely different reasons. Hoffman does so to illuminate her characters, while Ore appears more interested in exploring the dichotomies between the various polarities that make up her novel's background.

In Ore's book, Maude Fuller has been living in Berkeley, CA, hiding from her Bracken County relatives in the American South until she is called back to take care of her dying grandmother, Partridge. The oldest and most powerful witches of the family — Betty and Luke — want to eat Partridge's soul, as well as the soul of Maude's boyfriend Doug who follows her from California. The only way Maude can save them is by using her own inherited witch abilities that she has spent a lifetime disowning.

Ore does a tremendous job with her magic system — how the witches' magics work and the entities that are the real power behind the magic, riding in the witches' minds, creating feuds and problems simply for

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amusement's sake. Even better are her depictions of life in the South with all of its class systems — white and black, rich and poor, magic and technology. She also writes very readable prose.

My only problem with the book was with her characters. I'm not sure if she meant to do this deliberately or not, but there's a coolness with every one of them, a distance set between them and the readers so we never quite engage with them, a sense that they are merely surface, there to carry the story and theme forward but with no life of their own. I wonder if Ore has fallen victim to something she has Maude say at one point:

"When I've read science fiction, the stuff in magazines such as *Analog*, say, it seems like the characters are really thin. I wondered if that was an artifact of a technological society as much as bad writing. But if suffering like crazy makes great characters, then I'm not so sure the aesthetic pleasure is worth it."

Ore's characters don't have real traumas, merely plot problems, and therein lies the novel's weakness. To put this in a slightly broader context: The one other person in my circle of friends to have read *Slow Funeral* felt the same way, yet both of us were still interested enough in the setting of the book and Ore's thematic arguments to keep reading, so take the above criticism with a grain of salt. There's certainly much of worth to be found here and the characters could easily work for you.

Zod Wallop, by William Browning Spencer, St. Martin's Press, 1995, 288pp, $21.95, Hardcover

Every so often a book comes along that deserves to be an instant classic, and this fourth book by William Spencer leaps immediately into that company. I got the same feeling reading *Zod Wallop* as I did when I first read Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs* — a sense that here was something entirely original, a novel both serious and funny, beautifully written, a delight and a wonder, a true gift.

The plot, for all its complexities and deft about-turns, is relatively simple to describe: Harry Gainesborough once wrote a children's fantasy book called *Zod Wallop*, a huge success that was loved by young and old alike, but following the death of his young daughter, he no longer writes. His wife has left him and, after a time spent in an institution to treat his depression, he makes his retreat to a cottage by a lake where he partakes of too much alcohol, too often.

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(An aside here: Gainesborough's comment on how different *Walden* would have been if Thoreau had been a drinker — "Damn birds shrieking like hyenas this morning; I have nailed boards to the windows to keep the sunlight out." — is a perfect example of Spencer's wry worldview.)

At this point Raymond Story, another inmate from the institution where Gainesborough spent some time, reenters his life. Story is Gainesborough's number one fan. He has escaped from the institution with his wife, two cohorts and a monkey (don't ask what the monkey was doing there), and is intent on tracking Gainesborough down because the events of *Zod Wallop* — this fantastical creation of Gainesborough's — are coming true. Strange creatures haunt the countryside, a crippled girl walks, and there's a chance that while Gainesborough's daughter died in one world, she might still be alive in this one where so many elements of his fiction have come to life.

We also have evil pharmaceutical companies, chases and tragedies, insights and moments of utter, helpless foolishness. But what's such a blessing about this book, is how Spencer keeps it all together, how his characters are so fully realized when they might have been caricatures, and the sheer delight of his prose. The book opens with:

"The wedding was held outdoors. An April sky darkened and gusts of wind, like large, unruly hounds, knocked over folding chairs and made off with hats and handkerchiefs. A bright yellow hat went sailing over the lake, cheered on by two small children."

And continues with that same liquid surety, prose that easily carries you through the story, but that you can linger over as well. If you want to see how good fantasy can be, fantasy that makes its own path through the world, rather than following the easy route of novels that have preceded it, then read this charming gift of a book.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Brief Reviews: Books

To Write Like a Woman/Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction by Joanna Russ, Indiana University Press, 1995, 181pp, price unknown, trade paperback

THIS collection of essays and letters is thought-provoking and disturbing. For the non-academic, it is also like hearing half a conversation: one can only imagine a context around these essays, most of which were published in the seventies.

The first two essays instruct other critics in what they don't understand about analyzing science fiction, and these are rather dry, but after that, the interest kindles. Essay topics include an analysis of *A Boy and His Dog* (the movie version); the battle of the sexes in sf; recent feminist utopias; Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's work; Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"; and the works of Willa Cather.

In "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I think It's My Husband: the Modern Gothic," Russ dissects six gothics and leaves them fainting on the floor; and "What Can a Heroine Do: or Why Women Can't Write," is fascinating.

This collection begs several questions: what has Russ been writing recently (for instance, the Modern Gothics analyzed came out in the fifties through the early seventies; what would Russ make of current trends in romance)? Has she investigated children's literature? Where's the next volume of essays?

Yours, Isaac Asimov, edited by Stanley Asimov, Doubleday, 1995, 332pp, $24.95, hardback

Don't bother looking for any personal attacks in this collection of Asimov letters; that wasn't Isaac's style, though there were some ideas he hated, such as astrology or censorship.

The tone is mostly upbeat and humorous. Here's Isaac on travel: "Absolutely impossible for me to get to Springfield, Ill. I couldn't even get to Springfield, healthy."

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There is a lovely exchange between Isaac and Nobel prize winner Linus Pauling, who read all the *F&SF* essays and wrote whenever he discovered an error.

Isaac wrote roughly 90,000 letters during his lifetime. His brother Stanley, a former journalist, has arranged them by subject and provided introductions. It's a fresh and fascinating glimpse into the life of one of sf's and America's favorite writers.

Bloodchild and Other Stories, by Octavia E. Butler, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995, 144pp, $17

Octavia E. Butler calls herself a novelist—and she is—but when she turns her attention to the short form, the results are always memorable. In this slim volume are some of the most powerful stories of the 1980s, including the Hugo-award-winning "Speech Sounds," Nebula-award-winning "Bloodchild," and multiple award nominee "The Evening, the Morning, and the Night."

The stories make the volume important; the essays make it priceless. Butler has a gift for the personal essay. Her "Positive Obsession," originally published in *Essence*, is a wonderful exploration of the development of a writer. So are the afterwords to each story. Some even come with recommended book lists.

Bloodchild and Other Stories is an excellent reminder of the value of single author collections, and it is a delightful addition to any bookshelf.

ON SPEC, edited by the ON SPEC Editorial Collective, Tesseract Books, 1995, 255pp, price unknown

ON SPEC, the premiere Canadian science fiction magazine, has just released an anthology. The ON SPEC Editorial Collective's goal was to show to the world a unique Canadian voice, inspired by various cultures, mythos, and archetypes, and to do so in a way that was accessible to everyone, not just literary types and genre fanatics.

The collection does what the editors intended. It shows a wide range of speculative fiction, from vampires and dinosaurs to desolate futures; from erotic fantasies to hard science fiction. "Sommelier," by Catherine MacLeod, is one of the loveliest stories ever written: a Bradbury-like tale of the creation of special wines. "Crossroads," by Wesley Herbert, is reminiscent of Delany and Zelazny, a powerful tale of the disaffected.

There are many others stories, all strong. The editorial collective proved its point. Canadian speculative fiction

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is multi-layered, sharp, bold, sometimes cruel, and sometimes lovely.

Techno-Heaven, by Linda Nagata, Bantam Books, December, 1995, 357pp, $4.99

Linda Nagata, a frequent *Analog* and *F&SF* contributor, has written a novel of the future where the necessary structure of human society is debated around the issue of cryobiology. Her heroine is a strong woman who, having lost the husband she loves, puts him in cryosuspension, then fights for thirty years to bring him back to life. Nagata's vision of the future arising from technological advances is plausible and interesting, and at times, gripping; although a side plot consisting of her husband's "dreams" while on ice distracts from the cohesiveness of the story. The book is involving, flawed a bit by a frequent and annoying use of unclear and unenlightening metaphors, but ultimately worth reading.

"Still no sign of the Bigfoot, Professor."

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Dale Bailey's story, "Giants in the Earth," from our August, 1994 issue has just been reprinted in The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, *edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling. Dale's most recent story for us, "Sheep's Clothing," appeared in our October/November issue.*

Dale got the idea for "The Mall" when he was driving to Clarion Writers Workshop in 1992. He pulled over at a rest stop in Ohio. "The rest stop was more than just a gas station; it was a mall, with game rooms, bookstores — even a place to buy handcrafted boots. Every damn store was open at 3 A.M....And when I read about the new 'Mall of America' in Bloomington, Minnesota — the largest mall in the country, which really does *contain an amusement park — the rest of the story came together in my mind."*

The Mall

By Dale Bailey

ELLIS WATCHED THROUGH the rearview mirror as the city shrank to a jumble of angular boxes, lit up against the midnight horizon. Ahead, the highway ran straight through a seemingly endless expanse of shopping malls and reticulated lawns. At last, however, the suburbs began to give way to rolling pasture and woodland; a long-suppressed nostalgia for the curve of tree and slope welled up in Ellis. He felt like a snake, sloughing layers of stress and grime like husks of faded skin.

"We're off," he whispered. "Vacation at last." Katie shifted restlessly in the passenger seat, draped her slim hand across his knee, and muttered in her sleep. The kids did not move. Jason, ten, slumped in the back seat with his fingers resting lightly on his Gameboy. Donna, fifteen, clad in cut-off jeans and that damned Guns 'n' Roses T-shirt, pillowed her head against her arm.

Ellis turned his attention back to the road. Despite the long drive ahead, he could barely dampen his excitement. God knows, they deserved the holiday. Katie had been working long hours at the catering company and he

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was exhausted after months as supervising architect for the new mall going up at city center. This year, despite the voluble protest of the kids, Ellis had insisted on something more relaxing than people-choked beaches and amusement parks. The camping trip had been his idea. After all, he hadn't spent a night beneath the sky since he was Jason's age, when he had spent a summer at his grandfather's farm in Ohio.

During that memorable summer, Ellis had passed his days swimming and fishing, his nights supine in manure-scented fields, searching out the constellations he had discovered in an old book on his grandfather's shelves. Ever since, he supposed, he had taken solace in the heavens. He had missed them during the long years in the city. How many times during those years had he peered into a night sky hidden behind a canopy of nacreous city light?

Ellis was startled out of his thoughts when he topped a hill and discovered a galaxy of blinking lights sprinkled across the valley below. GAS! blazed a sign from the near end of a vast building. SHOPPING! glared another from the opposite end, almost lost in the distance. Atop the building, three stories high, ten-foot-tall letters flashed alternately red and yellow against the night sky: REST STOP! OPEN 24 HOURS!

Ellis glanced at the fuel gauge; the needle stood at half a tank. He guided the car down the curved exit ramp and parked beneath the pavilion overhanging the fuel islands. Across the moonlit parking lot lay the vast building he had seen from the highway. His headlights glared back at him from a towering glass vestibule. Beside a battery of revolving doors a sign proclaimed in flashing orange neon: *The American Mall! Amusement Park Inside!* The building seemed to shimmer momentarily in the clear air, wavering like a mirage behind ascending ripples of heat. Ellis yawned and turned off the headlights. Maybe some coffee was in order, too.

Katie stirred beside him. "What's wrong, honey?" she asked.

Ellis opened his door and stepped onto the pavement. "Rest stop," he said. "Better wake the kids. I don't want to stop again."

Ellis set a pump to fill the car and walked to the edge of the pavilion. He peered up into a hazy wash of gray. The light from the huge complex behind him blotted out the stars. Shaking his head, disgusted, Ellis returned to the gas pump. On the far side of the car, Jason yawned and rubbed his eyes with his fists.

"Wow!" he said. "Dad, it says amusement park inside. Can we go in?"

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"No way, stupidhead," said Donna, closing the door beside Ellis. "We're in a hurry." And then, as she caught sight of the enormous building at the other end of the parking lot, "Holy shit!"

"None of that," Ellis said. His eyes met Katie's across the car in the unspoken communication natural to them.

Raw-boned and dark as her mother, Donna had for years been reserved and studious. In recent months, however, she had started dating seventeen-year-old Eric — her first real boyfriend — and though she had remained studious she had become...well, less reserved. Leave her alone as long as she keeps her grades up, Katie had said, and her eyes flashed the same warning now.

"Dad," said Donna, her voice dreamy. "Can we go in?"

Ellis studied her for a moment. Her eyes had a glassy faraway look. If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn she was stoned.

"Dad!" Donna said.

Ellis shook his head. It was just the lights reflecting in her eyes, he told himself. He glanced at his watch. "Not tonight," he said. "It's after one."

"It says open twenty-four hours," Jason said.

The gas pump clicked off. "Come on," Ellis said. "You can come with me to find the attendant."

The four of them crossed the parking lot. Ellis and Katie dropped back to clasp hands, but the kids ran ahead.

"You know," Katie said. "I know it's late, but you could give them an hour or so inside."

"Honey, we still have a long drive."

"Well, I know, Ellis, but we're on vacation. *Your* vacation, remember. No one's particularly excited about it but you."

"I thought you wanted to go camping," he said.

"Well, I don't mind. But the kids aren't too happy. Come on, Ellis, it's an easy compromise."

Ellis shrugged. "We'll see. It probably won't even be open."

They followed Jason and Donna through the revolving doors and Ellis stopped abruptly, staring in astonishment at the enormous central gallery that extended before him to the limits of his vision. For a single moment he was so overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the place that he could not absorb particulars. Then slowly, details began to seep into his awareness.

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They stood at the edge of a broad walkway high above a sunken atrium. Far overhead, the ceiling disappeared in a sheen of subdued lighting. Six levels of deserted walkways, connected by escalators, encircled the vast central area. Calliope music reached Ellis, and he realized that below lay the amusement park the sign had promised. Stunned, he stared down at a slowly revolving Ferris wheel.

"Holy shit!" he heard Donna say again, but he couldn't bring himself to reprimand her. That was more or less what *he* was thinking.

Polished railings gleamed at him. Stores beckoned from the surrounding walkways.

"Daddy, *please*!" Jason said.

It took a conscious effort for Ellis to wrench his attention from the vista and focus on his son. The ten-year-old stood before him, holding his Gameboy loosely in one hand. Ellis stared at the boy as if he didn't quite recognize him: Nikes and Levis, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle T-shirt he had become shy about wearing to school. And in his eyes, the same glassy faraway look Ellis had previously noticed in Donna's eyes.

He was still pondering that when Donna spoke. "Come on, Dad! Can we please spend an hour or so in civilization since we have to spend the next *two weeks* out in the woods?"

"Now, listen — " Ellis began, but Katie clamped down hard on his hand. He tried again. "Guys, it's one-thirty in the morning."

"Well, you still have to pay for the gas," Katie said.

"No kidding. Where do you suppose the attendant is? Outside?"

"I didn't see anyone," Katie said.

Donna shifted on her feet impatiently. "Come on, Dad."

Katie squeezed his hand again and Ellis looked down into her clear eyes. "Listen," she said. "It *is* late and we do have to get on the road. But since it's obviously going to take a while for you to find that attendant, why don't we look around?" She glanced at her watch. "It's one-forty now. Let's say we meet back here at three. Okay?"

Always the peacemaker, Ellis thought. But what the hell, they were on vacation. And it *was* going to take a while to find the attendant, he supposed. "Fine," he said.

"Great!" Jason said.

Katie apportioned money to the kids and they disappeared down an

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escalator, moving toward the amusement park.

Ellis turned to his wife. Katie grinned up at him. "Always have to have your way, don't you?" he said, smiling. "I suppose you want to check out the mall, too?"

"You bet."

"Okay, then. I'll see you at three." Katie pecked him on the cheek and then stepped on the escalator to the lower levels. In moments, the vast mall had swallowed her.

"Well," Ellis said. Turning around, he peered out into the night. The car sat alone at the fuel pumps. Ellis couldn't see anywhere to pay for the gas out there. Nothing for it but to look in the mall.

Ellis turned to his right and moved along the railing that lined the walkway. Carnival sounds—calliope music and the seductive cry of barkers, their pitches unintelligible in the distance — rose to his ears. He caught a faint whiff of cotton candy. As he walked, trailing one hand along the smooth railing, he studied the stores on his right. They were typical of those he had seen in countless malls — an assortment of shoe stores and clothing stores, interspersed with occasional specialty shops.

Ellis had been walking for a while and was on the verge of trying his luck in the other direction when something caught his eye. He wasn't really sure what, but it was simultaneously familiar and strange, like the face of a high school acquaintance when encountered years and years later.

He paused, searching, glanced out at the walkway opposite, a thin line that blended into the mosaic of stores and signs behind it. Below, and far to his left, the Ferris wheel turned and turned. The scream of a thrill-seeker rose out of the pit, and he caught another saccharine hint of cotton candy in the still air. Cotton candy and something else, something pleasant and long-forgotten.

Ellis glanced at his watch and saw that he had been walking for half an hour. A wave of uneasiness began to build within him. Surely the gas attendant would be located closer to the door. That thought served as the catalyst for another, even more enigmatically disturbing. Surely, the gas station attendant would be located *outside* the damn door, else what was to keep people from filling up and driving away without paying? People did it all the time, he knew, having worked at a gas station one semester when he was in school. And that thought led to yet a third, like a tiny chain reaction

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of explosions in his brain: how could a facility this large *afford* to operate twenty-four hours when almost no one was using it?

The wave of anxiety crested and crashed over him. He turned abruptly to walk back in the direction of the revolving doors and that something familiar caught his eye again. What was it?

Ellis surveyed the nearby shops. He stood before the window of a used bookstore; a single word in gilt letters had been pasted high against the inner surface of the glass: *STARS!* A number of books and magazines were stacked below, astronomy texts and journals mostly, which struck him as a curious choice for a window display. That thought barely registered, however, before it was gone, displaced by a well of nostalgia. Ellis crouched, his elbows on his knees, and stared in disbelief through the glass.

He didn't know how long he had been there when the voice spoke: "Can I help you, sir?"

Ellis looked up into the slim pleasant face of a young woman, barely more than a teenager. She was dressed neatly in dark jeans and a lacy white blouse. Staring at her, Ellis could not help but think of Donna in her ragged shorts and black T-shirt. She was every bit as pretty as this young lady. If only she dressed better —

"Sir?"

"I'm sorry," Ellis said. "It's just that ..."

"What?"

Ellis stood up. "That book," he said, indicating a thin book with a faded dustjacket, half-hidden beneath a stack of *Sky & Telescopes*. "Can I see that book?"

"Certainly."

Ellis followed the girl inside and watched as she fished the book from beneath the stack of magazines. "There you go," she said. She placed it in his hands and moved away to stand behind the counter.

Ellis barely noticed. A warm flood of nostalgia suffused him. *The Boy's Book of Constellations*, read the title; below it was a dusty watercolor of a boy and a man looking into the night sky. The man held a book in one hand and pointed at the stars with the other. The stars themselves had been connected with chalky lines to form constellations: the Dippers, Virgo and Aquarius, others.

Ellis thumbed through the crumbling pages, stopping at last to study the

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central illustration: a map of the night sky, with the constellations traced in glowing lines against the darkness. Blackness rose like inky vapor from the pages, encircled his wrists and flowed away to fill the air around him. The bookstore receded slowly, becoming ghostly and faint. Finally, it disappeared altogether, and he found himself in a rolling pasture. A full moon drenched the scene in pale light. The rich heavy scent of cow manure, borne on a summer breeze, washed over him.

Inhaling deeply, Ellis sat in the long grass. He plucked a single blade, and chewed it idly as he stared up into the night sky. Stars stood out, bright and unblinking against the darkness. He lay back and it seemed to him that he fell into the sky, as if the earth had been inverted, gravity reversed. He drifted without thought into blackness, into a night place where the constellations stood out with clarity and order. He might have stayed there forever, had not some importunate worry begun to tug at the base of his consciousness.

For a while, Ellis tried to ignore it, as he had sometimes tried to disregard the sound of a television in the next room when he was reading a particularly engrossing book. Concentrating with all his might on the stars that stood out against the darkness above him, he almost succeeded. It was that knowledge, that awareness of success which doomed him, however, for with awareness returned the persistent tug of worry.

What? he thought. What was it?

And then: Katie. The kids.

Suddenly, the stars drew away to glimmering points. The field tore apart, shredding into dark rags that blew to the corners of his vision and disappeared. He stood in the bookstore, a grassy taste lingering on his tongue. For a single moment, Ellis thought he detected the scent of cow manure, half-familiar and weighted with all his memories of that long-ago summer. And then it too was gone, supplanted by the cloying odor of cotton candy. Ellis looked down at his hands, clenched white about *The Boy's Book of Constellations*.

"Sir?" the girl said. "Are you all right sir?"

"I—I have to meet my family," Ellis said. He forced his fingers to relax and shoved the book under his right arm. He glanced at his watch. Two forty-five. "I'd like this book, please," Ellis said. He placed it on the counter and reached for his wallet.

"Oh no, sir. Take it. It's yours. Your money's no good here."

"I'm sorry?"

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"Your money," she said. "It's no good here. The book is yours. The night manager has seen to that."

"The night manager?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see," Ellis said, but he didn't, not at all. He picked up the book and hesitated briefly. "You don't happen to know where I pay for gas in this place, do you?"

The girl gave him a puzzled smile. "Your money's no good here, sir," she repeated.

Ellis nodded. "I see. Well, I need to go. My family's waiting."

The girl didn't reply. Ellis left the store and walked rapidly in the direction of the revolving doors. Katie and the kids, he knew, would be waiting — Katie smiling because he hadn't made it back by three, the kids tired and grumpy.

But when he reached the doors at ten minutes after three, no one was there. Puzzled, Ellis went to the edge of the walkway and stared into the depths. From this angle, looking down beyond a lattice of walkways and escalators, with the Ferris wheel spinning below him, the mall seemed as void of stable perspective as an Escher print. Ellis felt as if he was staring into a kaleidoscope. Impossible angles converged in an endlessly replicating network of images that was somehow hideous. Sour bile rose in his mouth. With one hand, he clutched *The Boy's Book of Constellations* —

— *Open it!* —

— and shut his eyes. The music of the calliope built to a frenzy and swept him up in its jaunty rhythm. Against the dark screens of his eyelids, Ellis saw projected that whirling paradox of images, a crazy melange of escalators and walkways that slowly resolved into the ugly and familiar vista of the city as he had seen it through the rearview mirror: a hodgepodge of garish boxes, drowning out the stars.

Once, when Ellis had been in school, a professor had commented, "Nature hates a straight line." That statement returned to him now, in company with an arresting vision: a world with nothing but straight lines, a grid of streets that went on forever. Nostalgia for the curve of tree and slope surprised him again. A fleeting image of his grandfather's rolling pasture, the stars above, passed before him, and unbidden the thought came to him: the book. Open it.

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He turned his back to the pit and opened his eyes. He held *The Boy's Book of Constellations* in trembling hands. *Open it!* part of him cried. *Open it and be done with this!* No, Ellis thought. That was too easy. What the hell was happening here? Where were Katie and the kids?

Steeling himself, he turned and peered into the depths. Empty escalators and walkways intersected at wholly prosaic angles. The Ferris wheel revolved lethargically.

"Katie!" he screamed. "Jason! Donna!"

The mocking strains of the calliope drifted up to enfold him — that and his own voice, crying ghostly out of the distance. They're late, he thought, that's all. They're probably on their way right now. But even so, a hundred tenuous filaments of panic began to work through his body.

What if they weren't?

"Katie!" he yelled, and a rational core at the center of his mind wondered at the hysterical edge to his voice. What's wrong, Ellis? it asked. Something bothering you? And something sure as hell was, he knew. Something about this mall and this long strange night. Something about *The Boy's Book of Constellations*. "Donna! Jason!"

From behind Ellis, a mellifluous voice said, "It really is no use to shout, you know. They won't hear you," and panic — fear — came on like a light within him. Each one of those tiny filaments glared suddenly incandescent with hysteria. Out of the distance, his own cry returned to him, dissolving in the frenetic cadence of the calliope.

"Ellis," that voice said. "Why don't you turn around?"

Ellis opened his mouth to speak, but his throat had gone dry. Blood roared in his ears. Finally, his voice a sandpapery rasp, he said, "Who are you?"

The voice said, "I'm the night manager, Ellis. I think you knew that. Really, I don't see any point in talking to your back. Why don't you turn around?"

Ellis did. The night manager stood quietly before the revolving doors. He was angular and tall — too tall, some part of Ellis's mind insisted — dressed impeccably in a gray double-breasted suit with a pink vanity handkerchief. Ellis said, "What in the hell's going on?" He clutched the book —

— *Open it!* —

— against his chest and began to back away, skating his hand along the rail.

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"Ellis!" said the night manager. "Stop!"

Ellis stopped. Moving with the predatory grace and strength of a shark, the night manager glided across the space between them. He stooped and peered into Ellis's face, his black vertiginous eyes dissolving first into a wheeling panorama of constellations, and then into the kaleidoscope of images Ellis had seen before: escalators and walkways that met at impossible angles; the city, tawdry against the midnight sky. The night manager raised his bony finger and leaned even closer. His breath stank of cotton candy.

"Look," he hissed, and jabbed his long finger out over the rail. When he spoke again, his tone was reverent — the tone of voice a man uses when he encounters some awe-inspiring natural wonder. "Look at it. Isn't it beautiful?"

Ellis turned and looked out over the pit, following the line of the bony finger. The great mall lay spread out all before him, a vast well of light and sound and whirling movement that stretched to the distant horizon.

"Five-point-two-million square feet of retail space," said the night manager. "A seven-acre amusement park. I thought it might appeal to a man of your talents, a man of your profession." He moved closer, his long arm encircling Ellis's shoulders. His pale thin fingers enclosed Ellis's upper arm.

In his left hand, pressed close against him by the night manager's wiry body, Ellis held *The Boy's Book of Constellations*. When he spoke, his voice was tight with panic. "Where are my wife and children?"

"In the mall, Ellis," the night manager said. "Where else?"

Ellis struggled against the other man's grip, but the fingers about his upper arm merely tightened. The night manager swept him around and thrust him out across the railing. Ellis felt his back arch painfully, his feet come away from the floor, and then he was dangling out into space, the noise of the calliope rising around him.

"Listen, my friend," the night manager said. "Let's have some cooperation."

Ellis swallowed, and struggled to squeeze words past the huge lump that had formed in his throat. "Okay," he gasped.

Ellis felt himself pulled back across the rail. His feet touched the floor and he found himself staring into the night manager's fury-contorted face. His eyes were black pits. His lips pulled back in a savage grimace.

"Your family is quite content, I assure you. Jason is infatuated with the

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amusement park. And Donna. Well, she lives for the mall. She hardly took any convincing at all."

"And Katie?" Ellis asked. His voice had dwindled to a hoarse whisper.

The night manager chuckled. "Ahh, Katie. She was a bit more challenging. At last, she has a restaurant of her very own. There's always room for another merchant at the American Mall, Ellis. You, my friend, you're the only problem that remains."

Ellis's fingers tightened reflexively about the book and that interior voice piped up again: *Open it! It's —*

" — the only way," said the night manager. Grinning, he released Ellis's arms and stepped back. "In there, I won't disturb you. Nothing will. Just open it up, and I'll go away."

And then Ellis had the book open in his hands. Its pages seemed to whip by of their own accord, settling at last on the dark map at its center. Black coils rose up to embrace him, encircled his wrists like manacles, and flooded the mall with darkness. Ellis concentrated on the night manager's vulpine grin, but finally it disappeared, occluded by the encroaching blackness. He stood alone in his grandfather's pasture, beneath a spangled canopy of stars.

Ellis reclined on the hillside. His fingers twined in long grass, plucked a single blade, and brought it to his lips. Above him, the stars wheeled by. For a long moment, he fought to remember: a gaunt figure that moved with predatory grace; a vast enclosed space, where escalators and walkways converged at impossible angles; Katie and the children, somehow lost. But it was too much, too much for him to hold. He had fallen into the night sky, with only the grassy pasture beneath him, and it was all too distant.

A breeze washed across his flesh, bearing the pleasant scent of cow-manure, baked dry beneath a summer sun. That scent and something else, something sweet and not altogether pleasant. What was it?

The stars grew distant as Ellis concentrated, filtering out the heavy odor of manure to focus on the scent which lay beneath. Finally he had it: the midway smell of cotton candy. And with that scent it all came crashing back. A series of images exploded through his mind: the city, upright against the dark sky; the vast rest stop spread out across the valley; the night manager's fury-twisted features as he said, "Your family is quite content, I assure you."

This? He was to give up everything for this, a boyhood night on his grandfather's farm?

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The pasture came apart around him, black rags blowing to the edge of his vision and disappearing. He stood in the mall, the night manager before him.

"What is this place?" Ellis asked. His voice was the barest panic-stricken croak.

"Don't you know?" said the night manager. "Haven't you the least idea? And you've done so much to create it, you with your designs for fancy malls and fine new shopping centers. It's good work if you can get it, isn't it, Ellis?"

"No," said Ellis. "This isn't mine. I've done nothing to create this."

"But you have!" The night manager threw back his head, threw out his arms as if to encompass everything. When he spoke again, his voice was filled with an almost religious wonder. "Feel it, Ellis," he whispered, "feel it."

And Ellis did. A vast aching hunger seemed to sweep across the continent, to sweep him up in the currents of some voiceless all-consuming desire.

"What is it?" he said. "What is it?"

"Their hunger." The night manager leaned close into Ellis's face, his maniacal eyes seeming almost to glow. "Out of their ceaseless desire, this — " he gestured wildly at the surrounding mall, "this was born. I roam the night highways, Ellis. I feed on your desires."

"No," Ellis said. His voice was calm now, and very cold. He looked away, looked down at the book in his trembling hands, and all those summer nights on his grandfather's farm suddenly returned to him. "You can't have my dream," he said. "It belongs to me."

Ellis turned and cast *The Boy's Book of Constellations* far out into the pit. It tumbled as it fell, its dustjacket blowing loose and away, its pages riffling in the still air. It disappeared into the smear of light and color that was the amusement park. The music of the calliope shrieked to a climax and fell still. Ellis spun to face the night manager, but the other figure, tall and elongated as a praying mantis, had begun to shimmer and grow insubstantial.

"No!" Ellis screamed. "My family!"

The mall wavered like the image on a television with bad reception, breaking up, colors bleeding into long streaks. Even as Ellis watched, it began to fragment into long wisps and coils, so much fog before a heavy wind.

"My family!" Ellis screamed at the fading image of the night manager.

As if in answer to his cry, Ellis saw them, one by one, framed by the night manager's translucent form: Jason, alone atop the furiously spinning Ferris

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wheel, his eyes wide with hysterical joy; Donna, turning and turning in some private dance, with a partner only she could perceive; Katie last of all. She stood in a vast gleaming kitchen that seemed to go on forever. It was empty. Empty as far as Ellis could see.

"Katie!" he cried. "Katie!"

She looked up, horrific awareness dawning in her eyes. Then she was obscured by a veil of shifting colors.

The night manager's thin face split into a mocking grin. In the moment before he was torn into a hundred wispy fragments and blown away, he reached out and caressed Ellis's cheek with his long bony fingers. Finally only his voice lingered, distant and tiny, as over a bad telephone connection in the dead of night. "Too late, Ellis," it whispered, "too late."

And then he was gone entirely. Everything was gone.

Ellis stood alone by the car, with the rusty gas pumps beside him. Nothing else remained. All about him, the lone and level parking lot stretched away. A stiff wind came up, chasing litter across the moonlit pavement, and a rectangle of heavy paper flattened itself against the side of the car. It rustled when Ellis peeled it away. *The Boy's Book of Constellations*, he read.

"Goddamn you!" he cried into the night. And then, "Donna! Jason! Katie!"

He fell silent, and in the silence he heard Katie's faraway voice, fraught with the promise of tears, saying, "Ellis? Ellis?"

A great knot seemed to form in Ellis's throat. He scanned the parking lot, hardly daring to hope, and at last he saw her. A small pale figure, distant in the moonlight, she came out of the vast emptiness that had been the mall. She must have seen him simultaneously, for suddenly they were both running. They came together and Ellis swung her into his embrace.

At last, Katie said, "Oh, Ellis, I heard you. At the last minute, I heard you, and I understood."

"I know," he said.

They walked across the abandoned lot, back to the car.

"What about the kids?" Katie asked. "What about Donna and Jason?"

"I don't know," Ellis said. But those images remained: Jason, joyous atop the whirling Ferris wheel; Donna, turning in her private dance. Lost. Forever lost.

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I roam the night highways, the night manager had said, and now Ellis repeated those words to himself like a mantra, forcing himself to believe. Maybe it wasn't too late, he thought. Maybe, somehow, along some lonely midnight interstate, they would find this place again.

They would look until they did, no matter how long it took.

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Every year, writers in Eugene Oregon, celebrate Christmas by reading stories in front of the fire. Over a hundred Christmas stories have been written and published in various places from Analog *to* Boy's Life. *Only rarely is one of the stories right for* F&SF.

Jerry Oltion, whose Star Trek *novel,* Twilights's End, *will appear later this month, read a slightly different version of "The Plight Before Christmas" last Christmas Eve. The story is a delightful tale of time paradoxes and the art of giving.*

The Plight Before Christmas

By Jerry Oltion

MIKE WAS SCANNING THE morning newsnet for Christmas ads, checking the competition as usual but also hoping to find a present for Sarah, when the phone rang. Sarah had been cleaning the house last night, so she had set the ringer to "air raid," and apparently forgot to lower it again when she was done. The sudden clamor made Mike flinch hard enough to nudge his bowl of cereal over the edge of the table. It hit the floor with a thump, not breaking the bowl but still spraying milk and Moonie Bits outward in a white fan of drenching destruction — most of which wound up in Mike's open briefcase.

"Christ!" he shouted, jumping up and upsetting his chair, which in turn upset the shelf of African violets beneath the window. One of the violets also fell into his briefcase.

The phone shrieked a second time.

He stood over his ruined briefcase — and the ruined Bundy artwork, over which he had sweated for two long days to come up with a new concept —

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and clenched his fists while the phone rang again. The morning had started so well...

"Do you want me to get it?" Sarah asked from the bedroom.

Hmm. No reason why the morning couldn't *keep* going well, actually. All it required was the right attitude. "No," Mike said, unclenching his hands. "No, that's all right. I'll get it." Slowly, deliberately, he reached out and picked up the flatscreen from the kitchen countertop, set it upright on the table, and flicked it on. With a fiendish grin he shouted, *"What do you want?"*

He heard an indrawn breath before the picture formed, then Greg Penzley, one of the advertising firm's two senior partners, peered out of the phone at him with wide eyes. "Michael?"

Mike grinned wider. "No, it's the tooth fairy. Who'd you expect, idiot? You dialed my number, didn't you?"

"Michael, what in the world has gotten into — " Penzley suddenly laughed. "Oh, so that's how it is, eh? Well same to you, then. I'd *rather* talk to the tooth fairy than your whiny little carcass." He leaned back in his padded office chair, giving Mike a view past his bald head and rounded shoulders through the fiftieth-floor window overlooking downtown Portland. Penzley crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Your miserable attempts to come up with a new Bundy campaign are the laughingstock of the company. We've got a betting pool here at the office on when you finally come up with something, and I've picked December 31st. Five *years* from now."

Mike snorted. "Ha! Well you lose, then, jerk-face. The new Bundy ads are done and sitting in a pool of spilt milk in my briefcase."

Penzley laughed even louder. "Ah, so that's it! Well maybe you should just throw the whole damned mess out the window, along with your washed-up career."

"I think that's just what I'll do."

"Good. Fuck you."

"Fuck you too." Mike slammed the phone screen-first onto the table, but Penzley had beat him to the switch; his own image blanked out a fraction of a second before Michael's screen fell.

"Aaarrrrggghhhhh!" Mike's growl was an animalistic, primal-scream-therapy-style exhalation of pent-up fury. He picked up the phone and hurled it through the window. The glass shattered wonderfully, and Mike's briefcase, still dripping milk and potting soil, widened the hole in the phone's wake.

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Sarah leaned out from the bedroom, dressed in only a light blue towel. "Hey, why don't you make some noise while you're at it?"

Mike was breathing hard now, and grinning like an idiot. "Noise? You want noise? All right, I'll give you noise!" He grabbed the edge of the table and heaved it over, scattering to the floor the pile of books, magazines, and newsdisks, plus their scanner and the vase full of roses he had brought home for Sarah last night. The reading material merely thumped, but the vase hit the edge of a chair and shattered with a satisfying crunch, and the floor shook when the table struck it. Mike shoved it on over into the Christmas tree, which went down in a shower of tinkling ornaments.

Sarah applauded. "Feel better now?"

"Yeah." Mike straightened, laughed, and stepped toward her, but his foot caught one of the shards of vase.

"Ow!" He raised his foot and pulled out a long sliver of glass. Blood dripped to the carpet. "Oh, son of a bitch that hurts."

Sarah winced in sympathetic agony. "Fun's over."

"Yeah. Guess so." He limped down the hallway into the spare bedroom, where they kept the backspacer, leaving a trail of blood spots behind him.

"Don't go back too far, okay?" she said, batting her eyelashes and leaning out for a kiss as he passed.

He blushed. "I won't." He gave her a quick kiss — his foot hurt too much to put any real feeling into it — stepped into the closet-sized booth in the spare bedroom, set the single dial in the waist-high control panel for twenty minutes, and said, "See you in another life, sexy."

Sarah nodded. "Bye."

He closed the door and pushed the "go" button.

The shower was still running when he opened the door again. He heard Sarah and himself giggling softly as they made love and thought briefly about joining them for a quick threesome, but the morning had really been going just about perfect without modification. Besides, his foot hurt like hell. Better just take care of business and get it over with.

He padded down the hallway, then stopped. Blood trail. Christ, that'd be just as hard to clean up as the cereal would. Shrugging, he went on into the kitchen, grabbed a wad of paper towels, and padded back to the backspacer. He wrapped the paper towels around his foot, set the timer for five minutes further back, and pushed "go" again.

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* * *

The shower was just starting up when he opened the door. The floor was clean. Mike hobbled into the living room, set the telephone ringer to "gentle," and turned back toward the backspacer, but as usual when he'd made a change that created a paradox, he didn't have to climb all the way back in and push the "return" button. The universe, ever tidy in such matters, took care of that for him. He didn't feel a thing when it edited him out of existence.

The phone rang while Mike was reading the morning newsnet for Christmas ads. He laid down the scanner, took a bite of cereal, and reached behind him to the kitchen counter for the phone. Propping it up on the table, he swallowed and switched it on after the third ring. "Wilson residence."

"Michael? Penzley here. Just calling to confirm that you've got the new Bundy ads ready for us today."

Michael looked over to his briefcase lying on the floor beside the table. Hmmm, that bowl of cereal looked awfully close to the edge. He nudged it farther inward while he said, "No problem, sir. They're sitting in my briefcase, ready to go."

"Good. I knew we could count on you. See you at nine."

"See you then." Mike switched off the phone and turned back to the newsscreen. Nine o'clock. That left him just under an hour to find a present for Sarah before he went to the office. Plenty of time, if he just knew what to buy her. That was always the rub, though, wasn't it? When he asked her what she wanted, she just smiled coyly and said, "Oh, I already have everything I want," which was very flattering but no help at all. *After* Christmas, of course, she would go out and buy whatever it was she'd been hoping for all along, but she never told him what it was ahead of time. No, she evidently thought it was his job to figure that out on his own.

He didn't have to get a present this morning, of course. He still had this evening, and two more shopping days left after that before Christmas. He just wanted to get it taken care of early, so he could relax about it and concentrate on the last-minute ads for this afternoon's and tomorrow's electronic newsnet editions. The agency was swamped with clients this year, all of whom claimed that sales were way down and who wanted Mike and his co-workers to design completely new ad campaigns for them overnight.

Mike recognized the irony in an advertising art director who didn't know

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what to buy for his wife, but despite all the hype he spread about his clients' products, he hadn't yet found anything that *Sarah* might want.

He considered asking one of the women at the office what they thought, but he didn't want to resort to that. A present was supposed to be from the giver, not from his co-workers. And besides, they were all advertisers. They would just try to push their own product lines on him.

Sarah stepped into the dining room with just a fluffy blue towel wrapped around her body. Her red hair dripped water from the ends, and a few drops landed on Mike's briefcase as she bent over to kiss him on the cheek. He glanced down to see if she'd hit the artwork, but she'd just missed it, so he nudged the briefcase aside with his toe and kissed her more enthusiastically, inhaling the aroma of soap and fresh-washed skin that he loved so much in the mornings. He slipped a hand under the towel, and she giggled. "You silly, you'll be late for work if you start that again."

"I could always loop back," he said, tugging playfully on the towel.

"And I could invite the neighbors in to watch," she said, backing away and re-wrapping herself in the towel.

It was an old argument, reduced by now to those two lines. Sarah saw no point in doing something that would obviously be edited out when the people involved backspaced into their normal lives, while Mike felt that any pleasant experience was worth exploring, no matter how illusory it might turn out to be. It wasn't just an argument over fooling around, either. The fallout from their different philosophies spread through their entire marriage. Sarah didn't like going to movies that might gross her out or bore her, while Mike felt that he should try everything that came along, and just edit out later the ones he thought were a waste of time. Sarah didn't like experimenting with food, while Mike would eat practically anything short of live bugs—and he may have even tried that once or twice, but if so then he'd definitely backspaced over the experience because he didn't remember it.

That was Sarah's point. If you didn't remember it, if in the final version of reality you had never even done it, then why bother to do it in the first place?

And Mike's answer was always "Why not?" Lots of people *did* invite the neighbors over for orgies. Mike had heard of stranger things than that, too; murder mystery parties with authentic murders, religious mass-suicides that were undone when the day of judgment failed to arrive, even full-scale wars

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between nations had apparently been fought to find out what concessions to make at the bargaining table before hostilities began for real. Mike suspected he had volunteered to fight in at least one such war, and though he had no evidence to prove it, the thrill of knowing he *would have* done it was still his.

But not Sarah's. If she hadn't really done something, it didn't matter to her, and hence she didn't waste her time — even imaginary time — on things that wouldn't remain real.

It was possible to loop around and not create paradoxes, but to do that you had to make sure you didn't meet yourself or change anything you or anyone else would have done, and unfortunately this wasn't one of those situations.

"Poor baby," Sarah said. She kissed him on the cheek before she turned away toward the bedroom again to get dressed. "Don't forget your umbrella," she reminded him as she walked down the hallway. "It's going to rain this afternoon." Her implication was clear; she didn't want him backspacing for something that trivial.

He looked out the window at the city skyline beyond, and felt a brief impulse to pick up the phone and throw it right through the glass. That would be reason enough to backspace, he supposed, but he knew what happened to people who gave in to every impulse that came along. Backspacing was cheap, but it wasn't free; eventually the poor buggers had to accept whatever life they wound up with and damn their rotten luck. No, Sarah was perhaps overcautious, but she did have a point.

THERE WERE THREE murders on the subway, and a bombing that took out half the station just as Mike's train pulled in. The murderers were simply edited out before they got on the train, but in order to keep as much evidence as possible the police apprehended the bomber only moments before he set off the explosive, so Mike got to watch them lead him away in handcuffs. He was a normal-enough looking high-school kid, maybe early college age, dressed in a Santa suit to hide the dynamite taped to his waist, and he was grinning as he explained to the police how he'd built the detonator from paperclips and an old chemical battery. "I just wanted to see if it'd work," he told them. "I guess it must have, huh?"

"Must have," one of the cops said. He wore the puzzled look of someone trying to see through a paradox, but he finally just shrugged and said, "I don't

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usually get wild hunches like the one that made me check you for explosives without a pretty good reason."

The kid nodded, a slow frown replacing his own grin. "Why didn't you go back and stop me from building it?" he asked.

"Got to have a deterrent," another cop said. "You could have killed people. Probably did. If we let everybody do that whenever they wanted without fining them, we'd be so busy backspacing we'd never get past this afternoon."

"So what's the fine, anyway?"

They passed out of sight and hearing before Mike could learn the kid's punishment. It was pretty steep, he knew. A public backspace affected thousands of people, and though nobody had proved that it was any tougher to rebuild an entire city's day than it was one person's, people like Sarah hated the thought of having the job forced on them, even if they didn't know it had happened.

Mike didn't care, particularly, though it did bother him just a little that he had probably died in the explosion. The kid had just been goofing around, sure, and the police had fixed it all before the fact, but it was still pretty bad manners to kill people without their permission.

He browsed the jewelry and knick-knack shops on his way toward the elevator, but his mind wasn't really on it and he saw nothing that screamed out "Sarah!" to him. Hmm. Well, then, he would try again this evening. He had plenty of time.

J.P. Bundy was a wiry, frenetic, balding man who had no doubt been called a yuppie back when he was young and the term had been coined. He'd made a fortune selling men's cotton briefs at a nickel a pair below his competitors' price, but that had been years ago. Now Bundies Undies was just another clothing company, and J.P. was merely an uppie. And by the looks of the sales chart at the head of the meeting room, he was rapidly becoming a downie.

"December sales are as flat as *July!*" he shouted in his high-pitched voice, slapping his palm on the table for emphasis. "Three days before Christmas and we haven't even seen a blip in the curve. What kind of an ad campaign are you people running that can't sell product at Christmas?"

Mike wanted to tell old J.P. that his particular brand of underwear wasn't exactly a perfect Christmas gift. He made mostly boxers and jockeys —

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perfectly good ones, Mike admitted — but not the sort of thing a person bought for a gift unless they were desperate. And even then, if Mike were desperate enough to buy underwear for a gift, he would at least get something from Fredericks or Heidi's.

But he would never tell J.P. that. In fact, as long as J.P. paid him to do it, he would tell J.P. that his underwear was the best damned Christmas gift in the known universe. He would even tell other people that, in tonight's and tomorrow's editions of the newsnet. He pulled the printouts from his briefcase and marched up to the front of the room, where he laid the first of them on the projector. It showed a sexy woman — Sarah, in fact — wearing a Santa hat and little else, and smiling invitingly as she twirled a pair of Bundy's briefs by their elastic band. Underneath the picture was the line, "Bundy's fit better under the tree."

There was a tense silence as every ad executive in the room waited for some clue how to react. Mike obligingly told them. "J.P.," he said as he brought the lights down. "This ad will sell underwear, and here's why. Because your underwear is the best damned Christmas gift in the known universe, that's why."

It was a long afternoon. Bundy wasn't the only client who needed reassurance. Sales were down all across the board, from fifty-cent stocking stuffers all the way up to new cars and diamond jewelry. Mike and the rest of the staff at Penzley's Advertising spent the entire day scrambling to jump-start the usual Christmas buying frenzy, but the atmosphere in their offices was that of a submarine crew in a sea full of depth charges. There might be a safe path through the next two days, but none of them knew what it was. In all likelihood, unless one of them had a brainstorm, they would lose every contract they had by New Year's.

The only consolation was the knowledge that nobody else's ads were working any better. People just weren't buying this year. The shops were full of browsers, but their wallets were staying firmly in their pockets.

Mike dug through sales figures from last year. They had been down, too, but then the reason was obvious. Backspace technology had just been legalized for the public in November, and every family that could afford one had a single, telephone-booth sized present beside the tree on Christmas morning. That no doubt accounted for some of the drop in traditional sales

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this year, too, as latecomers to the fad picked up their units, but damn it, most people already *had* their Backspacer. They should be buying gloves and hats and overshoes for each other again. And underwear.

Mike stared out his window as the sun dropped behind the western horizon. It would be great if some future version of himself would leave him a clue. God knew, he certainly would do it if he had a clue to give, but if his future self figured it out beyond the Backspacer's two-week return limit, then he was screwed. And the fact that nobody in the entire agency had shouted "Eureka" all day didn't bode well.

He was too tired to shop for Sarah's present on the way home. He probably should have, he thought when a wild-eyed street preacher in a dirty brown trench coat stood up at the head of his subway car and began shouting about the evils of backspacing, but the sudden decrease in riders as people looped back to take another car at least gave him room to stretch out. The preacher focused his attention on the few remaining riders — the only riders to get *on*, from everyone's revised point of view — but Mike tuned him out with practiced ease. He had bigger problems to occupy his mind.

Sarah was gone when he got home. Working late at the bank, no doubt handling another insurance company's bankruptcy papers. That meant it was Mike's job to cook dinner, but he just wasn't up to it yet. He flipped on the TV and settled into the couch for a bad movie first. He could loop around in an hour or so and start dinner a few minutes from now, and if he was careful not to interrupt himself in either the living room or the kitchen, he wouldn't create a paradox.

Beyond the window, the city lights were coming on as night fell. Inside, just to the left of the window, the Christmas tree was dark in its corner. Mike aimed the remote at it and turned on its lights, then watched them twinkle in counterpoint to the city outside. His gaze slid downward to the packages beneath it — including one that hadn't been there this morning. Bright green wrapping, with red ribbon and a red bow. About the size of a bread box. Had Sarah put something for him there after he'd left for work?

He got up to see, but when he read the tag he felt a shiver of excitement run down his spine. *To Sarah,* it read. *Merry Christmas from your eternal lover, Michael.*

From him? But he hadn't bought her anything...yet.

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He looked at the package, picked it up, shook it. It didn't rattle, but it had some mass. It could be anything, though, in a box that size.

Mike smiled, there beneath the glowing Christmas tree. He had no doubt packed it that way deliberately — *would* no doubt pack it that way — to fool himself as well as Sarah. There was no reason for him to know ahead of time what he had bought her. In fact, it heightened the mystery if he didn't.

He suddenly felt ten pounds lighter. The whole weight of the Present Problem had just been lifted from his shoulders. Now he was free to concentrate on his other problem, which was why the hell nobody was buying anything this year.

He looked down at the package, then out the window at the city, and he laughed. He held the answer to that in his hand, too. It wouldn't enable him to sell a damned thing until after Christmas, and poor old J.P.'s Bundywear was just going to have to get by on practical parents, but at least he knew why nobody was buying anything yet. After a year of growing used to the Backspacer, they weren't willing to accept anything less than absolute perfection in their lives, and like him, they were all waiting to learn what the perfect gift would be before they went out and bought it.

At least he could point out to his clients one bright side to the situation: Nobody would be returning unwanted presents this year.

He shook Sarah's gift again. Did it shift a little bit? He held it up to his ear and shook it once more. Suddenly he felt all the exitement of being a kid at Christmas again. Only two days until he and Sarah opened their presents. He couldn't wait to see what he'd bought her.

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Since her last appearance in F&SF *(June, 1992), Bonita Kale has sold stories to* Aboriginal SF, Asimov's, Pulphouse, *and* Full Spectrum 4. *She writes that she is "about as ordinary as they come — middle-aged, middle-class, and living in Cleveland."*

An ordinary mind does not come up with a story like "Annie's Shelter." It is an off-beat story which, Bonita promises, is "science fiction for one *of the protagonists."*

Annie's Shelter

By Bonita Kale

THE CHURCH BASEMENT was warm and garlicky. Long tables stretched the length of the room; kids ran up and down the rows, yelling; an old lady who reminded him of his grandma sat at a card table and took people's money.

Ziv Matusec tilted a chair against a table to save the place, and got in line. Up ahead, past the murmurs of a pair of old ladies and the whines of a bunch of kids, a woman's voice called, "Hi, Chef Gio!" Ziv saw a bright-eyed man look up from ladling spaghetti sauce and grin at someone in a pink sweater. "Hi, Annie! Good to see my best customer!"

"Yeah! I *love* spaghetti, Chef Gio!"

"I know you do, Annie." The chef smiled at her like you'd smile at a cute kid.

When he got through the line, Ziv saw that his place was taken. Once, he told himself, he would've argued, or leastways given the guy a dirty look. Now he took the first empty seat he saw, setting his tray on the scarred

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Masonite table and dumping his backpack on the floor. When he dropped into the folding chair, he found a steel column against his elbow.

Someone across from him giggled. It was the girl in the pink sweater. "That's not a good seat," she said smugly. "No one takes those seats against the poles. *This* is a good seat, see? I always get a good seat."

She sounded like a kid, but she wasn't one. In her early twenties, maybe. Straight brown hair, pale skin — kind of ordinary, except for something odd about her expression.

"I come here every Friday," she said, cutting her spaghetti into inch-long pieces.

It was exciting to talk to a stranger! Annie could hardly believe her luck. "I come here every Friday," she said. She looked down to make sure all her spaghetti was cut, and raised a forkful cautiously to her mouth.

The man across from her mumbled something and twirled his spaghetti on his fork. He didn't get sauce on his shirt. Maybe if she practiced, she could learn to eat spaghetti that way, too. At the workshop, they said if you practiced, you could learn almost anything.

"You know what I do?" she said.

He sighed. "No, what do you do?"

"I work!"

"Really?"

"I really do. I'm a Plant Lady."

"A wha?" he said into his coffee.

"A Plant Lady. I go to all the plants in a big building and water them and wash them and pick off their dead leaves." She found her card and showed it to him. "See?"

"'Plant People,'" he read aloud. "'Specializing in the Office Environment.'" Then he read the written-in part: "'Anne Bowles.' That's you, right?"

"That's me." She put the card away in her red purse. "I go on the bus in the morning, and then they take us to the buildings. I go on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday." She raised a finger for each day. "Not the other days. I go to the bus stop at seven o'clock."

"Pretty early."

"I have a watch, see?" She held up her wrist; the watch was blue plastic, and digital. "When it says seven oh oh, then I go."

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"When it says seven oh one, then you run," he told her.

She stared for a minute, then laughed suddenly. "When it says seven oh two, then..."

"Then you're through."

"Oh, you're *good*," she said. "Only Jimmie — he was at the workshop — only Jimmie's that good at rhymes." She checked to see if there was any milk left in her carton, but the straw made a slooping noise, so she drank her coffee instead.

The man had finished his. "They give seconds on coffee?" he asked.

Annie jumped up. "I'll show you." She led him to the big urn and showed him how the little handle worked.

On the way back, they passed a baby in a high chair. He had brown skin and fuzzy dark hair and little white tennis shoes. Annie smiled at him. He smiled back, and spaghetti fell out of his mouth. Annie felt a feeling as if her arms were reaching out.

"I used to work at a workshop," she said, when they were sitting again. "But I like being a Plant Lady better." She sipped her coffee. "What do you do?" she asked. It came out sounding just right. "What do you do?" she asked again, just to hear herself.

He took a bite of his cake. "I study," he said with his mouth full.

"Oh." She tilted her head and looked at him. "What do you study?"

He bent across the table towards her and ruffled up his hair with his fingers. "I'm an *alien* — from outer space! I study Earth people."

She jumped. "You scared me. That's not nice."

"Sorry." He slumped back in his chair.

She looked at him again, but he looked just like a regular person in jeans and a blue shirt. "What's your name?"

"Ziv. Ever hear it before? It's an alien name!"

Actually, it had been his uncle's name. Ziv didn't know why he'd told this retard he was an alien. He just didn't want to say he was flipping burgers part time, again. Not long ago, he'd had a regular job, and a car, and an apartment. Lose the job, lose 'em all.

Now she was looking at him. God, she was trying to figure out whether to believe him!

"Are you fooling me?" she asked.

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"Would I do that?"

"I don't know. Sometimes people try to fool me."

A small poke of guilt annoyed Ziv and he set his jaw. "I'm from outer space."

"Really and truly, cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Yeah, yeah. Look, they're shoving us out. Where's the john around here?"

"It's next to the door. Do you have to go? I don't, 'cause I went before, and I can go again at home."

"Oh — yeah." He stood up and shrugged himself into his jacket, and she stood too, putting on her plaid raincoat, sliding her red purse onto her shoulder.

"Look, you wait for me here. And I'll walk you home, okay?"

"Sure, Ziv!"

He hurried in the men's room, unsure whether Annie might wander off without him. Too many people here, anyway; he couldn't strip to the waist and wash, the way he wanted to.

She looked clean and neat. Did she live with her family? If she did, why did she go to church dinners by herself?

If she lived alone, he could maybe get a night under a roof. He was smiling when he stepped out to join her. As they walked along St. Clair Avenue, he pumped her about her life. She lived in an apartment. She said "an apartment!" as if it was something important. But then she wriggled back to the topic of aliens, and Ziv realized with a start that she was trying to pump *him*. "How did you get here, Ziv?"

"By space ship, of course. Look, this apartment, what kind of place is it?"

"It's nice. What's the space ship look like? Is it long and skinny, or is it one of the round ones?"

"Round. Kind of like a saucer. Who owns the building?"

"What building?"

"The one you live in!"

"Don't yell. At the workshop, they said nice people don't yell unless they're playing a game."

When they got to the building, it looked okay — yellow brick, small and square, not too old. Ziv stepped behind Annie into the little lobby and waited while she found her key, then followed her through the door and upstairs into

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a hall that smelled of pot roast and Lysol. But after turning the key in the lock of apartment 2B, she said, "Thank you for walking me home, Ziv."

Ziv stalled. "What're you going to do now?"

"I watch TV, and then I take a shower, and then I brush my teeth, and then I go to bed," she said. "Don't you know that?"

"I'm an alien, remember?" He felt weak with the allure of her homey agenda. A little TV, hot water, a warm bed... "I'm an alien, how would I know what you do?"

"Are you *really* an alien?" she asked.

If he told her it was all a gag, she'd throw him out. No way could he stand to give up this warm, indoors feeling. "Look," he said. It was hard to talk; his throat was tight. "Look, how about I stay here, uh, and study Earth people?"

"At night?"

"Sure, I have to know what Earth people do at night, too."

"I don't know what *you* do. Not even in the daytime!"

"Look, let me come in, okay? And I'll tell you."

With a click, the door of the apartment across the hall opened, and a man looked out. Abruptly, Annie pushed her door open. Ziv followed her inside, she shut the door hard behind them. Ziv had caught only a glimpse of gray eyebrows that met in the middle, and a bald brown head.

ANNIE THOUGHT Mr. Demahl was scary. He was big and brown and he never smiled. On Sundays, he left the comics from his paper at Annie's door. But when she met him at the incinerator, shuffling along in his slippers, she always looked down so he wouldn't see her.

She locked the door carefully, and put the key away in her purse. Then she hung her coat on its hanger in the closet, and her purse with it.

Then she stepped into the living room and just looked. She always did that. This was her own apartment, not a group home. The vacuumed blue carpet, the white kitchen counter, the closets with her clothes lined up neatly in them — all hers. It was a good feeling.

Ziv sat down on the flowered sofa without looking at the apartment. Annie felt a little disappointed. Then Ziv said, "This is nice. This is real nice, Annie," and she felt better.

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"Do you have apartments like this where you come from?" she asked.

"Uh, no," said Ziv. "Our places are different." He put his hands behind his head and leaned back. "They're sort of like...caves. They have thick walls, and they curve around you, and they're warm and safe. And no one can come in unless you say so. And no one can take them away from you. No one."

He sounded sad. Annie sat on the floor and leaned against the sofa. "Are you going back there soon, Ziv?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I don't know when I'll get back."

"Will they pick you up in a spaceship?" she asked. "Is it fun to fly in space?"

He smiled down at her. Ziv had a nice smile. "Yeah," he said. "They'll pick me up, and we'll go zooming off in space, past all sorts of stars and planets and stuff."

Annie thought about the space ship zooming through the night sky. "Past the moon?"

"Yeah."

"Higher than a plane?"

"Sure. Spaceships go way higher than that."

It sounded nice, to fly in space. People on TV sometimes met aliens, but Annie never had before. He looked like a regular person, but his name was Ziv. He was studying Earth people. Maybe he would study her! Annie hoped so.

Ziv said he would sleep on the sofa. He said he would be quick in the shower, but the TV showed four sets of commercials before he came out, with his hair slicked down and a different shirt on. He was carrying something wet. "I hung some stuff in the bathroom to dry, okay? You got a hanger for my shirt? I wrung it out pretty good; it won't drip."

His underwear was hanging all along the shower rod. It made Annie's shower dark. When she came out, his shirt was on a hanger hooked to the ceiling light in her bedroom.

She slept with the damp shirt hanging over her bed. It looked like it was flying. On her sofa was the alien, with her coat spread over him.

Ziv worked lunch shift Saturday, feeling clean all over. Clean body, clean hair — and he'd fed coins to a washer and dryer and washed not only his

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own stuff, but Annie's small laundry bag of clothes. No one could say he wasn't a good roommate.

Knowing there was a roof waiting for him at night gave him a full, contented feeling as he plunged frozen fries into grease. Annie was no genius, but after all, a genius wouldn't let a strange alien sleep on her sofa. And she looked okay. If he was going to be staying with her awhile, well... Like his grandma always said, waste is a sin.

By the next day, Ziv was settled in, with his own blanket, pillow, and key.

Annie liked having Ziv there. She did, really. But he mixed things up. Annie always did her wash on Wednesdays. She always went to the place with the nice man who helped her with the change machine. But Ziv took some of her clothes on Saturday and went to some *other* place. And then she didn't know how many to count when she was counting her underpants. And he left his blanket and pillow on the sofa, and he used her special coffee mug. And he moved her pink mat, the one she kept next to her bed, to the bathroom.

But Ziv told her stories about his home, where everyone lived in houses like caves and took rockets instead of cars or buses. She liked his stories.

He didn't want her to tell anyone about him, and she didn't like that. She couldn't think of anything else to talk about, and people said, "Annie, why are you so quiet?"

Mr. Demahl was looking funny at her lots of times, too. He probably thought she was letting a stranger in her apartment. "Ziv's not a stranger," she wanted to tell him. "He's an alien!" But she was afraid. Mr. Demahl's deep voice sounded so fierce.

Rachel Quillon was different. She was the manager of the apartment building, and she lived down in apartment 1D. She had gray hair in a bun, and a nice smile, and fuzzy slippers. Annie always said Hi when she met her in the hall, vacuuming or dusting or washing the stairs.

Sometimes Rachel invited her into her kitchen for a cup of tea. Annie didn't like tea much, but she liked talking to Rachel.

"I see you have a friend staying with you, Annie."

"Yes!" Annie hadn't thought of it before, but Ziv was a friend, wasn't he? "His name is Ziv."

"Interesting name. Is he Slovak?"

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Annie shook her head. "He's just Ziv." She put sugar in her tea and reached for a saltine.

"Is Ziv from around here?"

"Uh, no."

"Where is he from, Annie?"

Annie looked down at the table. "He doesn't want me to tell."

"Oh." Rachel sipped her tea. "Annie — " She stopped, and didn't say anything for a while. Then she put her hands flat on the table and leaned toward Annie. "Annie, you don't have to do what Ziv tells you to. What matters is what *you* want to do."

Annie thought about that. "I can do what *I* want."

Rachel sat back. "Exactly."

"Do you know about babies?" Annie asked.

Rachel stood up suddenly, turned to the counter and poured more hot water on her teabag. "I know the basics," she said. "One end screams and both ends leak." She leaned against the counter and looked at Annie. "What do you want to know about babies?"

"At the workshop, they taught us a lot. They taught us what to do and what not to do."

"Yes..."

"But we like to do some of the things they taught us not to do."

"I'm not surprised."

"They taught us how to make babies. But they said we shouldn't."

"I tend to agree. Tell me, did they give you any help in this entirely laudable project?"

"What?"

"Did they show you how *not* to make babies? Did they give you pills or a something to put inside you? Anything at all?"

Annie shook her head impatiently. She didn't remember anything like that. "Does it work?" she asked.

"The pills?"

"No, I mean — does it work, to make a baby? The way they said?"

Rachel sat down hard in her chair. "Yes," she said. "I believe it works."

"Thanks, Rachel!"

That night, Ziv moved the TV to the bedroom. Aliens liked to watch TV in bed, he said. They sat on the bed and watched together.

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Ziv put his arm around Annie's back. She liked that, and she leaned against him. Then he put his hand on her boob. The ladies at the workshop called it a breast, but everyone else called it a boob.

His hand felt nice. She snuggled into it. She was glad she was wearing her pink nightie. It was pretty, and she liked the slippery way it felt when Ziv rubbed it.

Jimmie at the workshop used to like to do that, too. Annie wondered if Ziv would like other things Jimmie had liked. She reached her hand into his lap to try.

"Hey!"

Annie snatched her hand back. "I'm sorry."

"No, no," he said. "That's fine, baby. That's great. You surprised me, is all."

"You like that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I like it fine."

"Jimmie used to like it, too."

"I bet he did."

The alien was made like Jimmie, but he knew more things to do. Annie liked some of them. She forgot about the TV. Later, Ziv fell asleep. He took up a lot of room in the bed, so Annie moved to the sofa. She lay in the dark and thought about warm, smiley babies.

The next afternoon, when Annie came home from work, she couldn't find her key. She buzzed her apartment, but no one answered. She banged on the glass door, and after a long time, she saw someone coming down the stairs. It was Mr. Demahl. He looked cross.

"What's wrong, lose your key?"

Annie nodded.

"Where's the guy?"

"What guy?"

"The boyfriend, girl! The guy been living in your apartment!"

Mr. Demahl was so big and grumpy, Annie was scared. "You know about him?"

"Seen him coming in and out often enough. What else I got to do these days but watch people?"

Annie peeked up at him. He didn't look as mean as he usually did. The wrinkles around his mouth were kind of twisty, like almost a smile.

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"Please don't tell anyone," Annie whispered.

Mr. Demahl shrugged. "Afraid he'll get tossed out?"

"He might get *killed*!" said Annie. "If Earth people find out he's here, they might *kill* him!"

"Look, you come on downstairs. We'll get a key from Rachel."

Downstairs, Mr. Demahl knocked on Rachel's door. His big fist made a loud sound, but he wasn't mad. "You got to really bang. She don't hear too good. This guy, he's off a space ship?"

Annie felt a little less scared now. "Don't tell, okay?"

They could hear Rachel coming, slip, slip, slip.

"Who said he's from space?" Mr. Demahl asked. "You just figure it out?"

"He told me," Annie said. "Ziv did."

Christ, she couldn't even keep hold of her own stuff! Ziv picked Annie's apartment key off the stairs. What kind of security could they have if she dropped keys around like that?

"We'll have to get a new lock," he told her when he got home that night.

"Oh, no, Ziv. Rachel will get me a new key if I can't find mine."

"And have keys to this place floating all over the city? Nah, I'll get a new lock."

"But Ziv — "

"Till then, if I'm not here, you just wait for me, okay?"

"But I want my key!"

"You can't have it," he explained patiently. "You lost it."

She cheered up after a while. He took her out for a taco to make her feel better. The poor kid couldn't help it, after all.

Still, it was a nuisance sharing the apartment with a retard. She wanted everything the same, week in, week out. Wednesdays washing clothes, Saturdays shopping at the Goodwill store, Sunday looking at the comics from that old black guy's paper. If anything interfered with her routine, she was unhappy. She talked a lot, too, and she squealed at every baby she saw.

He checked the papers for cheap places to stay, for better jobs. The old ladies who rented out rooms seemed to want non-smokers with references from six priests. The jobs wanted references from God.

He'd just have to stay here and save his money.

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One Saturday morning, Annie threw up. Ziv was mad. He told her to clean the floor. Then he went to work. Annie took the garbage to the incinerator and saw Rachel mopping the stairs to the third floor.

"I'm almost done; how about a cup of tea, Annie?"

"Will that make me throw up?"

"I don't believe so. Haven't you been feeling well?"

"I feel all right now."

"Have you been tired, Annie?"

"I was tired yesterday. I fell asleep. And other days, too."

Rachel dried the steps with a raggedy towel. Then she came down to Annie. "Do you know when your last period was?"

Annie went inside to get her calendar. She showed it to Rachel. Rachel turned the pages back to where the Xs were, and looked serious. She stood her mop and bucket in a corner and led the way down to her apartment. Then she made Annie sit on the sofa to drink her tea.

"Do your shoes feel tight, Annie? Are you sore here?" Rachel put her hands on her own breasts.

Annie nodded. "Am I sick?"

"I think you're pregnant." Rachel looked as if that was bad. But the next thing she said was good. "I mean, I think there's a baby growing inside you."

"Really?" Annie could feel her mouth stretching into a big smile. "Really? A baby for me and Ziv?"

Rachel put her hand on Annie's shoulder. "Do you want a baby?"

"Everyone wants a baby!"

But Annie didn't tell Ziv. She wasn't sure why not.

Ziv told Annie he'd changed the lock. "Now, no one can get in our room but us. Isn't that great?"

"*Rachel* can't get in?"

"Nope." He wished it was true, but locksmiths cost. "I've got the only key."

"Can I have one?"

"We'll see, okay? Maybe next week, if you're good."

Annie sat down on the sofa. "Do they have keys on your planet?"

"Don't need 'em."

"Tell me a story about your planet, Ziv."

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"Now don't start — "

"Please?"

"Oh...all right, I guess." He sat down beside her, shoving aside the blanket and pillow. Annie rested her head on his shoulder and he fiddled absently with the front of her blouse.

"Well, we don't have any keys or any locks. Everyone has a warm place to stay, and plenty of food. And if someone needs to stay with a friend for awhile, that's okay. And everyone walks around in the sunshine and looks at the green sky and the fluffy blue trees and smiles at everyone else."

"And the bell flowers."

"Yeah, flowers that ring like bells in the wind." He remembered his grandma's wind chimes. "And we fly up to our moon any time we want to, and there's a big park there, with rides."

"Roller coaster." Annie sounded sleepy.

"Yeah, roller coasters and Ferris wheels and water slides — everything like here, only bigger. All lit up with colored lights. All bright and all free for everyone."

"And at night..."

"At night, we fly home and sleep. And everyone has a house alone. And no one can throw you out."

Annie was asleep. He looked at her with growing dislike.

Then one night Annie got a bug for the movies. "The movies, for Christ's sake! You know you'll just sleep through most of it."

"Please, Ziv?"

He was too soft-hearted, that was it. She did fall asleep, of course, right during the car chase. He had to shake her awake for the long walk home. And tomorrow was Wednesday — no work for her, but an early day for him.

On the way, Annie yawned and popped out with, "Rachel says I'm going to have a baby."

"Shit!" He stopped under a street light to look at her face. "You're fooling, right? This is a joke?"

"No, it's really real! Are you excited, Ziv?"

"You'll have to get rid of it, that's all."

"Get rid of it? No!"

"Look, I don't want a baby!"

But she turned stubborn. "I don't care! *I* want a baby!"

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He stopped trying to be nice. "Dummy! Where would we keep a baby, anyhow?"

"Babies are little! There's room!"

"How can a retard like you take care of a baby?"

She was crying now. Big baby herself. "You can help, Ziv. You can tell the baby all your stories. It'll be fun, Ziv!"

He closed his eyes. Afterward, he was proud that he hadn't hit her. "Go away," he said, not loud.

"Go away? Where, Ziv?"

"I don't care. Just away."

She didn't move. After a minute, Ziv stalked off, but she followed him. He was forced, finally, to wrench himself away and dodge into an alley to lose her.

Do her good to be on the streets a night. Find out what it's like. After a while, Annie gave up looking for him, and he went home. In bed, he stretched and felt himself fill the apartment. His mind wandered to blue trees, and flowers that rang like wind chimes, and he slept.

ANNIE LOOKED at her watch under every street light. It said nine-two-oh, and later it said nine-three-oh. It said nine-something for a long time. Then it said ten-something for a long time.

She found a hamburger place and went in to go to the bathroom. "Does Ziv work here?" she asked, but they didn't know Ziv.

She stayed there until they looked at her funny. Then she went outside and started hunting again. "If I have a baby, then I'm a mother," she said over and over. "Mothers aren't scared."

Her watch said two-five-two when she curled in a deep church doorway and fell asleep. It said six-three-four when a police officer found her and brought her home, and Rachel tucked her into a yellow bed.

When she woke, it was daytime. She heard Rachel's voice.

"It's her life," Rachel was saying. "But it's so *hard*."

Annie heard a deep bumble. She got out of bed and went into the living room to see who it was.

Mr. Demahl was sitting on Rachel's sofa.

"Feeling better?" Rachel asked. "I'll get you a cup of tea." She got up and

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went to the kitchen. Annie was left alone with Mr. Demahl. She wanted to say, "Come back, Rachel, I don't want any tea," but she didn't.

Mr. Demahl shifted himself on the sofa. "Sit down, Annie."

Annie sat on a low chair with blue and white stripes.

"I hear your man from outer space left you out all night," said Mr. Demahl. "That wasn't very nice of him, now was it?"

Annie thought. No, she decided, it wasn't. She was surprised at the thought, because Ziv was a good person. But he had done a bad thing.

"You think he should have done that, girl?"

She shook her head. "I didn't like it."

Rachel came in with a tray. It had mugs of tea on it, and a plate of saltines, and sugar and milk and part of a lemon. Mr. Demahl put milk in his tea; Rachel squeezed the lemon over her tea. Carefully, Annie spooned sugar into her tea and took a saltine.

"So, how about throwing Ziv out?" Rachel said.

Annie breathed in hard and coughed. Rachel had to pat her back. Annie was embarrassed in front of Mr. Demahl.

"We didn't get that far," Mr. Demahl said. "You got to have a little patience, Rachel."

"I don't," she said. "I never did." She put her empty cup on the tray on the coffee table and turned to Annie. "Look, Annie, you have this Ziv in your apartment and a baby on the way. Start with the baby. Do you know it's going to take a long time, and then it hurts a *lot*? Maybe you shouldn't have the baby, Annie."

"I want the baby." Annie was sure of that.

"You might not be able to be a Plant Lady, Annie. You might have to stay home and take care of the baby."

"I like being a Plant Lady," Annie said slowly. "But I want the baby."

"You want the baby *more* than you want to be a Plant Lady?"

This was hard. A baby was a thing you could hold. Being a Plant Lady was different; you couldn't hold it and look at it to see whether it was better than a baby. Then she remembered: she'd be a mother! A mother was better than a Plant Lady! "I want to be a mother," she said firmly. "I wasn't scared in the night."

"No, but — "

"Mothers aren't scared. I'm going to be a mother."

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Suddenly, Mr. Demahl let out a booming laugh that made Annie jump. "Round one to Annie," he said. "Baby stays."

Rachel made her lips into a straight line. "Shares on the sitting, then." She turned back to Annie. "Now, about Ziv."

Mr. Demahl interrupted. "Look, Annie, you don't have to do nothing you don't want."

"But you don't want Ziv staying with you, do you Annie?" Rachel said. "He hasn't behaved well, has he? And it's *your* apartment after all. *Your* check pays for it, remember."

Annie thought about that. "It's my apartment."

"Right."

"So I should have the key?"

Rachel blinked. "Right."

"Not Ziv."

"Definitely not Ziv." Rachel leaned forward and touched Annie's knee. "Are you going to throw him out?"

The stripes on her chair were like little roads. Annie followed one with her finger. "If I throw him out, will I still have the baby inside me?"

"Yes." Rachel waited until Annie looked up at her. "Ziv's leaving won't change that."

"Then...can you throw him out for me, Rachel?"

"No!" Mr. Demahl said, before Rachel could answer. "You got to do this yourself, girl! It's your apartment — you're the boss there. It's what *you* say, counts. You want him to go, he goes. You want him to stay, he stays. *You* decide, and *you* tell him!"

She was the boss. Not Ziv. Not even... She peeked at Rachel, wondering if Rachel could tell what she was thinking. Not even Rachel. Annie was the boss in apartment 2B. It was a staggering thought.

"I want to go home."

Upstairs, Annie put Rachel's key carefully in her pocket. Ziv was at work; Annie was alone in the apartment. She picked up Ziv's socks and folded his blanket. She vacuumed the floors. She scrubbed the kitchen and bathroom sinks, and the tub, and the mirror. She washed the toilet with its special brush. She took the pink bucket and the blue-handled mop and mopped the kitchen and bathroom floors with water and good-smelling green stuff.

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Annie was suddenly very hungry. She opened a can of tuna and made two big tuna salad sandwiches. Then she sat down at her table and ate her sandwiches, looking around at her clean apartment. I'm the boss here, she thought.

Tomorrow she would go to the Plant People store. They would take her to a building, and she would go to all the offices on her list. All day, she would water the plants and take off their dead leaves and make them feel comfortable. "The plants like you, Annie," a lady at one of the offices had said.

She was a good Plant Lady. She was a good apartment cleaner. She practiced saying, "Ziv, I want to talk to you." When she heard his key in the lock, she went to stand near the door.

When Ziv opened the door, Annie was right in front of him. Poor dumb kid, he actually felt some relief to see her after her night out. But he had to move her aside to get into the room.

"Ziv," she said. Her voice sounded peculiar. "Ziv, I want to talk to you."

"Okay, after I get this frying grease outa my hair."

He ran the shower and forgot her until he stepped out of the bathroom with a towel around his hips. "Hey, Annie, how 'bout buying a blue towel or a white one or something? These pink ones — "

He stopped. There were people in the room — the lady from downstairs and the black guy from across the hall, sitting together on the sofa. He stared at them warily.

"Annie needs to talk to you, Ziv," said the woman.

Called him Ziv and he didn't even know her name. Or, wait — some memory of Annie's talking about her came back to him — Rachel, that was it. And the guy was the one Annie called *Mr.* Demahl.

"I'm kind of occupied right now," he said, half sarcastic and half worried.

"Get your pants on," said Demahl. "We can wait."

"I gotta work — "

"Only till two, Wednesdays."

"Look, you been spying on me?"

Demahl shrugged. "Sure."

Ziv's towel was slipping. He grabbed it and retreated to the bathroom, but he didn't rush, dressing. Let them wait.

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Eventually, he pasted a salesman smile on his face and stepped out to face them. "Well," he said, "what can I do for you?"

Annie was standing at the window. She looked at Rachel, and Rachel nodded. "I want to talk to you, Ziv," Annie said.

"Any time, Annie. How 'bout some coffee while we talk?"

Before the others could say anything, she had slipped into the kitchen. She'd be in there awhile, now, counting cups of water, and scoops of coffee.

"Okay, what d'you want?" he said to the two left.

Rachel sat up straight and pressed her lips together. Demahl shifted in his seat. "It's Annie needs to talk to you, not us. But." He paused and shook his head. "Annie been all excited, having you here. Talks about you a lot."

"Yeah?"

"Says you're a spaceman."

"She got that wrong." Ziv kept his voice down.

Rachel's face reminded him of his boss's when she found a bag of moldy hamburger buns — kind of that same wide look around the nostrils. "You come, I understand, from a place with houses like caves, and green sky, and plants that ring in the wind..."

"Annie remembered all that?"

"What sort of games have you been playing with Annie, Ziv?"

"We *know* one of 'em," Demahl put in.

"Why did you tell Annie you were from outer space?"

Ziv's shoulders twisted. "Ah, I don't know. It started as a gag, kind of. But she liked it, you know?"

"And now she's pregnant. With your child." Rachel sounded sick.

"Boy, you sure messed up." Demahl leaned back and the sofa creaked. "What'd you want to go and do that to Annie for?"

"I didn't know she'd get knocked up, for Christ's sake! How was I supposed to know?"

It was funny, for about two seconds, to see that big old guy and that little lady, both wearing his grandma's you're-in-trouble-now look.

"I had no place to stay! I was on the streets! You know what that's like?"

"Yeah," said Demahl. "I been there once or twice. And I didn't lie to no poor dumb kid and then knock her up."

"Well, I did. So sue me. You won't make Annie happy that way."

"What way, Ziv?" It was Annie, with the red plastic tray she'd bought on

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their last trip to the Goodwill store. Now it held six mugs — four full of coffee, one of milk, and one of sugar. A saucer held cookies. Annie stooped and put it on the end table.

"I didn't have any lemon, Rachel."

"That's fine, Annie. I don't take lemon in coffee."

"Now should I talk to Ziv?"

Rachel opened her mouth, but Demahl butted in. "Yeah. You talk to him. We'll go away, okay?"

"Okay," said Annie, in a small voice. Then she took a breath, not like a regular person, Ziv thought, but loud and deep. "Okay." She insisted that he and Rachel take their cups with them. "Take cookies too!"

When they were gone, Ziv relaxed. "Hope they don't steal the cups."

"Rachel wouldn't steal. Mr. Demahl wouldn't steal. They're good."

"You think everyone's good." Ziv dropped into a chair and leaned back with a grin. "You think everyone's *wonderful*!"

"I don't think you're wonderful, Ziv," said Annie.

Funny, it kind of hurt. With an effort, he smiled. "Not wonderful, maybe, but pretty damn good."

"You're good. But you do bad things."

"Sure. You do too. Everyone does."

Annie looked straight at him. "You did bad things to *me*." She held up one finger at a time. "You left me alone at night, outside. You ate all the raisin bread before I got any. You sleep in my bed and take up all the room. You mess up the bathroom all the time." She counted. "Four bad things."

She took a breath. "Go away, Ziv," she said. "Go back to your space ship."

His smile felt tight. "Suppose I don't want to?"

"I'll get Mr. Demahl," said Annie. "He told me to. He said, 'If he won't go, you come and get me, you hear?' That's what he said."

Ziv stood up and came close to her. She smelled like coffee and the stuff she cleaned with. He stroked her arm with one finger and watched the hair stand up. "You don't want me to go, Annie," he said.

Now she was crying, and she pushed him away. "Yes I do," she said. "I don't want you to study me anymore. Go away, Ziv!"

For a crazy minute, Ziv thought of refusing — just stay here, see what she'd do about it. Then he thought of Demahl, and of social workers and

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county authorities. And babies. God. How'd he gotten into this in the first place? "No trouble. I don't hang around where I'm not wanted."

He packed carefully, folding shirts and rolling underwear. He still had most of the money he'd made since coming here; he divided it among his pockets. He took a plastic bag to carry his pillow, threw in soap, and his toothbrush, and a new tube of toothpaste. From the kitchen, he took two loaves of bread and as many cans as he thought he could carry.

Annie watched, not speaking. When he had his jacket on, he came close to her, but she backed away.

Ziv glanced around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. The living room looked as warm and inviting as it had the first night; the sight pinched. For a moment, he felt as if he could, somehow, have managed better.

He opened the apartment door.

The two of them were sitting on the steps to the third floor, Rachel leaning against Demahl. She sat up when he came out.

"Look, you got a paper?" Ziv asked Demahl. "I maybe could find a room or something."

Demahl looked gently amazed, but pulled himself up and went into his apartment. He came out with a newspaper and handed it to Ziv.

"Thanks. Hey, Rachel? Can I use you for a reference?"

Rachel opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again. "Yes," she said in a strangled voice.

ANNIE LEANED over the banister and watched Ziv go down the stairs. At the bottom, he lifted his bag to his back and opened the inner door. She saw him bend to look into the mailboxes. Then he let the door go. A minute later, she heard the outer door open and close.

Annie cried, still leaning over the banister. Rachel patted her back. Then Annie stood up. She rubbed her face where the tears itched. "I still have a baby inside," she said.

"Yes, Annie."

Annie sighed. "I remember all Ziv's stories."

"I know you do."

"I can tell them to the baby, when it comes out."

"Oh, my dear," said Rachel.

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"Hush," said Mr. Demahl. "You tell that baby any stories you want, child."

Annie went into her apartment. She closed the drawers Ziv had left open. She cleaned Ziv's hairs out of the tub drain. Then she moved the TV back to the living room and laid her pink mat next to the bed.

The apartment looked nice. Annie patted the space baby in her tummy. Today was Wednesday; Plant People was closed. It was her washing day.

"Excuse me. Are you from Mars or is that some sort of communication implant?"

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In the last year, Dean Wesley Smith has sold ten novels. Spiderman: Carnage in New York *from Ace/Boulevard is one of the first to appear in print.*

He has also sold a large number of short stories. His most recent for F&SF, *"Jukebox Gifts" (January, 1995), made the preliminary Nebula ballot.*

He returns with a tender tale of love abandoned, but not forgotten.

In the Shade of the Slowboat Man

By Dean Wesley Smith

OVER THE LONG YEARS I HAD grown used to the sweet smell of blood, to the sharp taste of disgust, to the wide-eyed look of lust. But the tight, small room of the nursing home covered me in new sensations like a mad mother covering her sleeping young child tenderly with a blanket before pressing a pillow hard over the face.

I eased the heavy door closed and stood silently for a moment, my clutch purse tight against my chest. One hospital bed, a small metal dresser, and an aluminum walker were all the furniture. The green drapes were slightly open on the window and I silently moved to stand in the beam of silver moonlight cutting the night. I wanted more than anything else to run. But I calmed myself, took a deep breath, and worked to pull in and study my surroundings as I would on any night on any city street.

As with all of the cesspools of humanity the smell was the most overwhelming detail. The odor of human rot filled the building and the room,

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not so much different from a dead animal beside the road on a hot summer's day. Death and nature doing their work. But in this building, in this small room, the natural work was disguised by layer after layer of biting poison antiseptic. I suppose it was meant to clean the smell of death away so as not to disturb the sensitive living who visited from the fresh air outside. But instead of clearing, the two smells combined to form a thick aroma that filled my mouth with disgust.

I blocked the smell and focused my attention on the form in the bed.

John, my dear, sweet Slowboat Man, my husband once, lay under the white sheet of the room's only bed. His frame shrunken from the robust, healthy man I remembered from so many short years ago. He smelled of piss and decay. His face, rough with old skin and white whiskers, seemed to fight an enemy unseen on the battleground of this tiny room. He jerked, then moaned softly, his labored breathing working to pull enough air to get to the next breath.

I moved to him, my ex-husband, my Slowboat Man, and lightly brushed his wrinkled forehead to ease his sleep. I used to do that as we lay together in our featherbed. I would need him to sleep so that I could go out and feed on the blood of others. He never awoke while I was gone, not once in the twenty years we were together.

Or at least he never told me he had.

I had never asked.

I was hunting the night we met. The spring of 1946, a time of promise and good cheer around the country. The war was won, the evil vanquished, and the living bathed in the feeling of a wonderful future. I had spent the last thirty years before and during the war in St. Louis, but my friends had aged, as always happened, and it was becoming too hard to answer the questions and the looks. I had moved on many times in the past and I would continue to do so many times in the future. It was my curse for making mortal friends and enjoying the pleasures of the mortal world.

I pleaded to my friends in St. Louis a sick mother in a far away city and booked passage under another name on an old-fashioned Mississippi riverboat named *Joe Henry*. I had loved the boats when they were working the river the first time and now again loved them as they came back again for the tourists and gambling.

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For the first few days I stayed mostly to my small cabin, sleeping on the small bed during the day and reading at night. But on the third day hunger finally drove me into the narrow hallways and lighted party rooms of the huge riverboat.

Many soldiers and sailors filled the boat, most still in uniform and most with woman of their own age holding onto their arms and laughing at their every word. The boat literally reeked of health and good cheer and I remember that smell drove my hunger.

I supposed events could have turned another way and I might have met Johnny before feeding. But almost immediately upon leaving my cabin I had gotten lucky and found a young sailor standing alone on the lower deck.

I walked up to the rail and pretended to stare out over the black waters of the river and the lights beyond. The air felt alive, full of humidity and insects, thick air that carried the young sailor's scent clearly to me.

He moved closer and struck up a conversation. After a minute I stroked his arm, building his lust and desire while at the same time blocking his mind of my image. I asked him to help me with a problem with the mattress on my bed in my cabin and even though he kept a straight face the smell of sexual lust almost choked me.

Within two minutes he was asleep on my bed and I was feeding, drinking light to not hurt him, but getting enough of his blood to fill my immediate hunger.

After I finished I brushed over the marks on his neck with a lick so that no sign would show and then cleaned myself up while letting him rest. Then I roused him just enough to walk him up a few decks, where I slipped away, happy that I might repeat the same act numbers of times during this voyage. It was an intoxicating time and I felt better than I had ever remembered feeling in years.

I decided that an after-dinner stroll along the moonlit deck would be nice before returning to my cabin. I moved slowly, drinking in the warmth of the night air, listening to the churning of the paddle wheel, feeling the boat slice through the muddy water of the river.

Johnny leaned against the rail about mid-ship, smoking a pipe. Under the silver moon his Navy officer's white uniform seemed to glow with a light of its own. I started to pass him and realized that I needed to stop, to speak to him, to let him hold me.

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He affected me as I imagined I affected my prey when I fed. I was drawn to him with such intensity that resisting didn't seem possible.

I hesitated and he glanced over at me and laughed, a soft laugh as if he could read my every thought, as if he knew that I wanted him with me that instant, without reason, without cause. He just laughed, not at me, but in merriment at the situation, at the delight, at the beauty of the night.

He laughed easily and for the next twenty years I would enjoy that laugh every day.

I turned and he was smiling, a smile that I will always remember. I learned over the years that he had the simple ability to smile and light up the darkest place. He had a smile that many a night I would lose myself in while he told me story after story after story. I never tired of that smile and that first exposure to it melted my will. I would be his slave and never care as long as he kept smiling at me.

"Beautiful evening, isn't it?" he said, his voice solid and genuine, like his smile.

"Now it is," I said. I had to catch my breath even after something that simple.

Again he laughed and made a motion that I should join him at the rail gazing out over the river and the trees and farmland beyond.

I did, and for twenty years, except to feed on others while he slept, I never left his side.

THE SMELL of the room pulled me from the past and back to my mission of the evening. I looked at his weathered, time-beaten form on the bed and felt sadness and love. A large part of me regretted missing the aging time of his life, of not sharing that time with him, as I had regretted missing the years before I met him. But on both I had had no choice. Or I had felt I had had no choice. I might have been wrong, but it was the choice I had made.

Since the time I left him I had never found another to be my husband. Actually I never really tried, never really wanted to fill that huge hole in my chest that leaving him had caused.

But now he was dying and now I also had to move on, change cities and friends again. I had always felt regret with each move, yet the regret was controlled by the certainty that the decision was the only right one, that I

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would make new friends, find new lovers. But this time it was harder. Much harder.

I sat lightly on the side of his bed and he stirred, moaning softly. I again brushed his forehead, easing his pain, giving him a fuller rest, a more peaceful rest. It was the least I could do for him. He deserved so much more.

This time he moaned with contentment and that moan took me back to those lovely nights on the *Joe Henry*, slowly making our way down the river, nestled in each other's arms. We made love three, sometimes four times a day and spent the rest of the time talking and laughing and just being with each other, as if every moment was the most precious moment we had.

During those wonderful talks I had wanted to tell him of my true nature, but didn't. The very desire to tell him surprised me. In all the years it had not happened before. So I only told him of the twenty years in St. Louis, letting him think that was where I had been raised. As our years together went by that lie became as truth between us and he never questioned me on it.

He was born in San Francisco and wanted to return there where his family had property and some wealth. I told him I was alone in the world, as was the true case, just drifting and looking for a new home. He seemed to admire that about me. But he also knew I was free to move where he wanted.

I had so wanted him to know that.

The day before we were to dock in Vicksburg I mentioned to him that I wished the boat would slow down so that our time together would last. The days and nights since I met him had been truly magical, and in my life that was a very rare occurrence.

He had again laughed at my thought, but in a good way. Then he hugged me. "We will be together for a long time," he had said, "but I will return in a moment."

With that he had dressed and abruptly left the cabin, leaving me surrounded by his things and his wonderful life-odor. After a short time he returned, smiling, standing over me, casting his shadow across my naked form. "Your wish is granted," he had said. "The boat has slowed."

I didn't know how he had managed it, and never really asked what it had cost him. But somehow he had managed to delay the boat into Vicksburg by an extra day. A long wonderful extra day that turned into a wonderful marriage.

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From that day forward I called him my Slowboat Man and he never seemed to tire of it.

"Beautiful evening, isn't it?" he said hoarsely from the bed beside me. His words yanked me from the past and back to the smell of death and antiseptic in the small nursing home room. Johnny was smiling up at me lightly, his sunken eyes still full of the light and the mischief that I had loved so much.

"It is now," I said, stroking him, soothing him.

He started to laugh, but instead coughed and I soothed him with a touch again.

He blinked a few times, focusing on me, staring at me, touching my arm. "You are as beautiful as I remembered," he said, his voice clearing as he used it, gaining more and more power. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too," I somehow managed to say. I could feel his weak grip on my arm.

He smiled and then his eyes closed.

I touched his forehead and again he was dozing. I sat on the bed beside him and thought back to that last time I had sat beside him on our marriage bed, almost thirty years earlier.

That last night, as with any other night I went out to feed, I had put him to sleep with a few strokes on the forehead and then stayed with him to make sure his sleep was deep. But that last night I had also packed a few things, very few, actually, because I had hoped to take very little of our life together to remind me of him. It had made no difference. I saw his face, his smile, heard his laugh and his voice everywhere I went.

I had known for years that the day of leaving was coming. And many times over the years we were together I thought of telling him about my true nature. But I could never overcome the fear. I feared that if he knew he would hate me, fight me, even try to kill me. I feared that he would find a way to expose those of us like me in the city and around the country. But my biggest fear was that he would never be able to stand my youth as he aged.

I could not have stood the look of hate and disgust in his eyes.

At least that was what I told myself. As the years passed since I left him I came to believe that my fear had been a stupid one. But I never overcame that fear, at least not until now.

I know my leaving to him must have felt sudden and without reason. I

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know he spent vast sums of money looking for me. I know he didn't truly understand.

But for me I had no choice. During the month before I left comments about my youth were suddenly everywhere. Johnny and our friends had aged. I hadn't. I even caught Johnny staring at me when he thought I wouldn't notice.

Three nights before I left, one waitress asked him, while I was in the ladies room, what his daughter, meaning me, wanted for desert. He had laughed about it, but I could tell he didn't understand and was bothered. As he should have been.

The night I left, I found a book about vampires hidden in a pile of magazines from his office. A well-read book.

I could wait no longer and I knew then that I could never talk to him about it. I had to go that night and I did so, leaving only a note to him that said I would always love him.

I moved quickly, silently, in an untraceable fashion, to the East Coast. But less than a year later, no longer able to even fight the fight of keeping him out of my mind, I returned to San Francisco under a new name and began to watch him from afar.

As with me, he never remarried. Many nights he would walk the streets of the city alone, just smiling, almost content. I paced him, watching him, protecting him from others of my kind and from the mortal criminals. I imagined that he knew I was watching him. Pacing him. Walking with him. Protecting him. I pretended that knowing I was there made him happy. Many nights I even thought of actually showing myself to him, of holding him again.

But I never did.

I never had the courage.

He stirred under the nursing home sheet and I watched him as he awoke. He opened his eyes, saw me, and then smiled. "Good. I was hoping you were more than a dream."

"No, Slowboat Man, you aren't dreaming."

He laughed and gripped my hand and I could feel the warmth flowing between us. I leaned down and kissed him on the cheek, his rough skin warm against my face. As I pulled back I could see a single tear in the corner of his right eye. But in both eyes the look was love. I was amazed.

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And very glad.

I had feared he would hate me after I had left him without warning. I had feared that when I came to visit tonight he would ask the questions about my youth and how I had stayed so young, questions that I had always been so afraid to answer. I had feared most of all that he would send me away.

But he didn't. And the relief flooded through my every cell. Even after almost thirty years he still loved me. I wanted to shout it to the entire world. But instead I just sat there grinning at him.

In the hundreds of years that I had been alive I had never felt or seen a love so complete and total as his love for me.

It saddened me to think that in the centuries to come I might never find it again.

"I'm glad you decided to come and say good-bye," he said. "I was hoping you would."

I gently touched his arm. "You know I wanted to when — "

He waved me quiet. "Don't. You did what you had to do."

My head was spinning and I wanted to ask him a thousand questions: How he knew? What he knew?

But instead I just sat beside him on the bed and stared at him. After a moment he laughed.

"Now say good-bye properly," he said. "Then be on your way. I overheard the doctor telling one of the nurses that I might not make it through the night and I don't want you here when I leave. Might not be a pretty sight."

I just shook my head at him. I had seen more death than he could ever imagine, but I didn't want to tell him that.

A long spell of coughing caught him and he half sat up in bed with the pain. I stroked his forehead and he calmed and worked to catch his breath. After a moment he said, "I loved it when you used to do that to me. Always thought it was one of your nicer gifts to me, even though I never understood just how or what you did."

Again he laughed lightly at what must have been my shocked look. Even after all these years, even with very little force behind it, his laugh could still gladden my heart, make me smile, ease my worries. Again this time it took only a moment before I smiled and then laughed with him.

"Now be on your way," he said. "The nurse will be here shortly and I have a long journey to make into the next world. I'm ready to go, you know?

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Actually looking forward to it. You would too if you had an old body like this one."

I nodded and stood. "Good-bye, my Slowboat Man." I leaned down and kissed him solidly on his rough, chapped lips.

"Good-bye, my beautiful wife."

He smiled at me one last time and I smiled back, as I always had.

Then I turned and headed for the door. I knew that I had to leave immediately, because if I didn't I never would. But this time he wanted me to go. I wasn't running away.

As I pulled the handle open to the dimly lit hallway, he called out to me. "Beautiful?"

I stopped and turned.

"I'm sorry I couldn't slow the boat down this time."

"That's all right," I said, just loud enough for him to hear. "No matter how long or how short the lifetime, sometimes once is enough. Sleep well, my Slowboat Man. Sleep well."

And as the door to his final room closed behind me I added to myself, "And thank you." ☙

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Deborah Wheeler lives in Southern California. Her stories have appeared in over a dozen markets, and her novels, including Jaydium *and* Northlight, *have been published by DAW Books.*

"Javier, Dying in the Land of Flowers" focusses on secondary characters first mentioned in Deborah's most recent F&SF story, "Madrelita" (February, 1992).

Javier, Dying in the Land of Flowers

By Deborah Wheeler

THE GROUP OF NEW-HIRES crowded together on a concrete slab that had once been part of a beachfront parking lot. Javier Gonzalez stood in front, pressing against the chain-link fence as he squinted at the sea. Waves made horizontal lines of light across the gray-blue water, cut by the wake of the boat from Tierra Flores Island. Gulls wheeled overhead, screeching.

Further south, aluminum-hulled dinghies bobbed at the public pier. Illegals used them to net croaker and sculpin, scavenger fish too polluted for the regular markets. Behind the rows of crumbling, sunbleached hotels, enclosed pedestrian corridors stretched from the West City mallplexes to the private filtered bathing areas. But here on the landing, the only sunscreens were tin slats that stank of bird shit. Strips of burning light fell across the rusting benches. The seats had all been taken hours ago by men who didn't have jobs on the Island but were hoping for an inside tip that might lead to one.

Some of the new-hires brought their families with them to see the Island boat and say goodbye. Javier's mother and sister had come with him on the electric tram from the East City *barrio*, but he'd already sent them back again.

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Mama had pulled away from him, leaving a film of sweat where they touched. Her eyes flashed, a ring of white around black. He wondered why she should be afraid now. All those years, he could have run with the cartel or been gunned down by them, or been zeroed out by drugs or lung crud. He could have blown his brains out like so many of his friends. But he hadn't. He was clean and mostly whole and now he'd landed a job — a real job.

Her plastic sandals scuffing the sand-gritted concrete, his sister, Ana, had followed Mama back into the glaring street, the baby sleeping exhausted on her shoulder. Blood spattered its lips where it had been coughing. Ana acted as if the baby were dead already, like the last one. Javier could feel the pain running like a sickness in her blood. Sometimes she hurt so much it made her crazy.

He would take care of her and the baby, too. There was no one else, not after her husband got caught in the crossfire of a cartel raid.

Javier looked from the boat to the crumbling beach town. He imagined what it would be like to be on that boat, coming back with cash and a second-class citizenship. Maybe something extra, some love-gift from a rich Angla. He'd seen how the *barrio* girls watched him through their eyelashes as he walked down streets at night. His hips were hard and slim, his skin honey-gold, a little reddish this past week as if he'd been careless enough to go out in the open sun, which puzzled him a little. But he didn't mind. Women liked a man who lived dangerously.

The boat nudged up against the inflated bumpers of the pier, wide and white with its sunshaded deck, indoor cabins, its tablecloths and flowers. A man and two women got off, escorted under parasols by the green-uniformed crew to the limo parked beyond the guest gazebo. The man wore a protective jumpsuit and the women, billowy caftans of peacock and rose-colored silk. Metallicized wraparounds hid their eyes.

The silk-robed women disappeared into the limo and the man beside Javier whistled under his breath. He was skinny and blond and his cheap boots bore a snakeskin pattern right down to the tips of the sharply tapered toes. "I hear that rich pussy is hot, real hot," he said. "I'm gonna get me some. Screw 'em so hard their eyeballs pop out."

Javier shook his head in disgust. "Shit, man, didn't nobody teach you how to treat your women?"

The hopefuls pricked their ears like slum rats scenting blood.

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"Better than you, *barrio* trash," Pointy-Toes shot back.

Javier grabbed a fistful of Pointy-Toes's shirt and spun him around, slammed his back against the fence. The metal links rattled with the impact. Pointy-Toes turned flushed and pale in patches. His lips drew back from his clenched teeth.

"Button it and keep it buttoned, you two!" One of the crew unlocked the gate and swung it open. "What's the matter, you trying to get yourselves fired before you even start?"

Pointy-Toes's fist was inches from Javier's nose, his bared forearm gleaming with body oil and sweat. The veins stood out sharply.

Blood that close to the skin, it spills real easy, Javier thought. He'd seen enough of his own to know.

Heart pounding, Javier reminded himself why the hopefuls gathered at the docks every morning. Some days, they said, two out of three new-hires got sent back. *But not me. I'm gonna be the one who makes it.* He opened his hand and let Pointy-Toes pull free.

Javier showed the crewman his job-offer papers along with the other new-hires. The crewman closed the gate after them and locked it. "That's it."

"C'mon," whined one of the hopefuls. "You gotta give us *somethin'*."

Javier laughed, his nerves still raw from the confrontation with Pointy-Toes. The crewman turned away from the hopefuls to glare at him. "What are you strutting about? Yesterday you were trash, no different from them. Tomorrow you gonna be trash again, just like that." He gestured at Pointy-Toes. "He won't make it one day."

"Not me," said Pointy-Toes. "I got connections."

The crewman shrugged and pointed below deck. "All of you, down there."

They waited for two hours in the airless cabin, sweating out of sight while the crew loaded the new guests and their luggage. They could hear music above, light tapping footsteps and women's laughter. The two staff who'd gone ashore came down and sat in a corner by themselves. Pointy-Toes started a crap game.

Javier watched the others lose the pay they hadn't got yet. From time to time, he touched his shirt pocket, just to hear the reassuring crinkle of his job

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offer papers. Last night, before the gunfire woke him, he dreamed about a man behind a featureless gray desk, an Anglo with a mouth like a shark's, starched green uniform over his paunch and a pistol at his hip. In his dream, the man pointed to Javier's job papers and said, "These are no good."

But his papers were good. Salvador, his father's cousin, had gotten him the job interview even before the position opened up. The guy who'd had the job, some friend of another cousin, had saved enough from his rich Angla *patrona* to buy a little farm down by Rio Sonora.

"You hear stories like that," Salvador had said, "and you think you got it made. You think you're in a goddamned candy store, you can have anything you want, and next thing you're thinking is how hot you are. But listen to me — boys like you come cheap out there. There's a hundred just as hungry who'll give them whatever they want. You can make it good with this job or you can piss it all away."

Javier had clenched his jaw to keep from talking back. Sal didn't mean to run him down like he had no sense. It was Sal who'd taught him that whatever else a man might do, he took care of his family.

Then Sal grabbed him by the back of the neck and hugged him like a son. "You're a good kid, I know that."

Gotta watch it, Javier thought, remembering. *That Pointy-Toes, he's got a death wish or something. He sure ain't worth getting into trouble for. Not when I got Mama counting on me.*

Javier took turns with the other men at the porthole as they pulled up at the guest pier. Tierra Flores, the Island was called, acres of lawns and tennis courts, pools of every shape and temperature, villas shielded by groves of gardenia and dwarfed palm on the slopes from the central lodge to the sifted white sand. The buildings were white, as well as the filmy uv-canopies that covered the walkways and beaches. All of it was brought from the mainland, Santa Barbarita or Ventura, even the sand.

The pier had been hung with streamers and balloons. Green-uniformed staff greeted the guests with smiles and strings of flowers. The women swayed and tilted their heads, but the wind carried away the sound of their voices.

The staff landing was a fenced slab of cinderblock on the other side of the Island, well hidden from the guest areas. A handful of green-shirted men

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waited there. They surged forward as the boat tied up, pressing thin packets into the hands of one of the crew, the one who'd locked the gate. It didn't look to Javier like a drug deal. Then what?

Two security men in body armor frisked Javier and the others before escorting them inside. The door led to a tunnel, down a short corridor and into a hot, bright-lit room. Here the new-hires stripped to their underwear. Their clothing went on a conveyor belt through the scanners.

The guards took the new-hires through the screening room one at a time. Sirens shrieked when Javier passed the metal alarm. He froze, startled, as a barbed-wire cage dropped clanging around him. The security guard pointed to the chain around his neck, strung through the bullet the docs had pried out of his spine.

"You gonna give me that thing, or you gonna turn around and go back home now?"

Javier didn't want to hand it over, though he knew he had to. He felt naked without it, for it was the thing that should have killed him.

He undid the clasp and held it out through the bars. The guard flipped up his face mask to take a closer look. His skin was ashy-brown, his nose broad and flat. He whistled softly as he held the bullet up. "Old style lead bullet smashed up good." He looked up. "They dig it out of you?"

Javier turned so the guard could see the scar running along his spine.

"Jee-sus," the guard said. "Better you than me." He tossed it back and raised the cage.

Javier's fingers closed around the warm metal. The guard jerked his chin toward the far door. "Disinfection and Medical through there."

Javier hadn't seen a doc since he'd left the E-ward after being shot. He didn't see one now. The physical exam — blood and semen samples, skin inspection, chest x-ray — was performed by a tech using automated instruments. The tech reminded Javier of a kid he'd grown up with, but he never spoke or looked Javier in the eye. He pointed, pushed and jabbed with his needles, all without a word.

Javier spent that night underground with the other new-hires, the six of them on narrow cots in an underground room. A security guard brought them food, soysteak in gravy, rubbery and bland. While the others settled down in bed, Javier tried the door. It was locked.

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"I saw this in a movie once," said Pointy-Toes. "Quarantine."

"Whatever you got," Javier muttered, "don't give it to me."

Javier lay for a long time in the darkened room, waiting for sleep. The paper sheets made unfamiliar sounds as the other men turned. Beyond that, nothing but silence. No gunfire, no creaking electric trams, no babies crying, no night *mercado* with its mariachi band and women hawking backyard vegetables.

He couldn't remember when he'd felt this tired, but something in the stale, clammy air set his nerves on edge. He thought of those days in the hospital when he drifted in and out of consciousness and no one knew if he was going to live or die. He thought of the hot white glare on the water as the boat came for him, and for a moment it burned away the dank shadows of the dormitory. Then he thought of going home, of Mama's face when he handed her his pay, more money than she'd see in a year. He'd buy her new shoes. She'd have a decent place to live, one that wasn't crawling with rats that would as soon take a bite out of you as run away, with water that didn't make you run bloody pus some days. And medicine for the baby, real stuff from a pharmacy, not street shit.

THE NEXT morning, Javier followed the other new-hires into the staff offices underneath the central lodge. The room was long and rectangular, a windowless cell. Two chairs, aluminum tubing and orange plastic, sat below a rattling overhead fan. Pointy-Toes and another new-hire took them, their satchels at their feet. Javier and the other men stood along the wall.

The name plate on the desk read, "S. Gibson, Personnel." S. Gibson strode into the room a few moments later, a woman in her fifties, tall and angular. She looked Latina, but her face had been artificially bleached so pale, as if she'd never been a minute out in the sun, that Javier couldn't be sure. Like the boat crew, she wore green, tailored and straight-skirted, not a wrinkle anywhere. She held a clipboard of papers in one hand. Her nails were long and curved, thick with layers of yellowed lacquer.

Her eyes on the papers and not the men, she slid behind her desk. "Congratulations and welcome to Tierra Flores, gentlemen. I see you've all passed your physicals. I'm Gibson, your supervisor." Frowning, she picked up a pencil and rolled it between her fingers. "Which one of you is Javier Gonzalez?"

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Javier shifted from one foot to the other. "Yeah?"

Without looking up, she jabbed the point of the pencil at the desk. "Let's get one thing straight from the beginning. It's, 'Yes, Miz Gibson' or 'Yes, ma'am.' Not 'lady' or 'buzz' or 'sugar' or whatever the trash calls women these days. Understand?"

Javier smiled, slow and easy, *No problem, lady.*

"Normally, we allow our staff a small amount of jewelry — wedding bands and the like. Nothing flashy or attention-getting. If you want to keep that bullet around your neck, wear it out of sight."

She handed them each a map. "Staff quarters are marked. There's an assignment roster on the compuscreen by the door — check to see which shifts you're on today. You'll have half an hour to collect your uniforms from Room Minus-21. The minus means you go down to the sublevels. Any questions?"

"Yea-ass, Miz Gibson," said Pointy-Toes. "We get any time off?"

"You were told that at the time of the job offer." She frowned again, knotting her black brows. "Two half-days a week, on rotation. Check the schedule."

Pointy-Toes sauntered to the desk, put both hands down and leaned forward. The edge of the desk caught him just below his crotch, accentuating the bulge as he thrust into it. His voice was lazy and hot, as if he was licking her. "And you...what do you do on your time off?"

Javier felt the sudden rush of heat in the other men. *Shit, man. Here comes trouble.* One blush on that paper-white face and they'd have her, as sure as if they'd all ripped her clothes off.

"I fire people," she said. "Starting with you."

"Me? You gotta be kidding. Come on, lady, I was just asking a question."

She reached down and pressed a button on her desk. The door opened and a male staff member stood there. Six foot six, big shoulders, mean blue eyes.

"You can't fire me!" The whining note in Pointy-Toes's voice rasped on Javier's nerves. "I got *connections.*"

Don't beg. Oh man, don't let the bitch make you beg. It's only a job... It's only back to moldy surplus even a cockroach wouldn't eat and dodging the cartel runners and watching another baby die of lung crud.

She lifted one eyebrow. "Harry, take the trash down to the dock and make sure he's on the next boat."

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Pointy-Toes picked up his satchel and jerked his arm away from Harry's big pink hands. "Someday, bitch, somebody's gonna *get* you."

"Someday. But it won't be you."

The plastic name tag said "J. Gonzalez." Javier wasn't used to wearing starched shirts and the uniform felt strange, all stiff and smooth. He trained with a quiet Asian man, Namese, who kept his eyes down, movements neat and precise, jaw clenched. He never took any notice of the beautiful things he handled. But Javier paid attention to each fold of the satin sheets, the crystal bowl of flowers on its lacy doily in the exact center of the marble table, the arrangement of the pillows and towels. The Gibson bitch would notice these details. It was like filling out the welfare forms; they'd use any excuse to shove them back in your face. He wouldn't give Gibson an excuse. He'd be the one in three who kept his job. If this ball-less squint could cut it, so could he.

They finished the last villa. Javier paused in the doorway and looked back at the main room with its pale peach upholstery and gauzy drapes. The room shimmered in its own pastel light.

Someday I'll have a room like this. Someday Mama will have a room like this.

He stepped backwards on to the porch and nearly knocked down the woman who was standing there. She caught at him to keep her balance and her wide sleeves fell across his hands. The fabric was ivory silk, cool and light. Underneath it, his fingers grazed the skin of her arms. She was the softest thing he'd ever touched. Her perfume filled his head. He realized that she was an inch or so taller than he, and that her eyes were round and blue and rimmed with gold.

Shell-pink lips curved in a smile. "Excuse me." She made the words into a kiss. Then she was gone, into the belly of the pale peach room, followed by three immaculate staff towing carts of luggage in creamy leather and a potted fruiting apricot tree on a rollered stand.

Javier ran a few steps to catch up with the Namese. "The guest ladies all like that?"

The Namese shrugged and said nothing.

That evening there was beach cleanup, busing dishes and hanging paper lanterns on the veranda outside the main lodge. The lodge sat on a hill

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overlooking the sloping moon-bleached lawns. The staff entrance opened from the back, down below, hidden from view by masses of snowy azaleas. Javier stepped out into the cooling night and glanced up at the veranda. The arpeggio of a harp rippled on the breeze and dancing couples drifted from the veranda like blown petals across the lawns.

She stood alone in the corner, the ivory-silk woman, her back to the music and curls spilling over her shoulders like spun glass. She turned and looked down to where he stood in the shadows, as if she could feel his eyes burning on her. He thought of her perfumed skin beneath his fingers. She swayed slightly, like the paper lanterns on the sea wind.

The next moment she was gone from the corner, moving with sweeping strides to the stairs. The breeze caught her long filmy skirts against her legs. He saw the outline of her thighs, the mound above them where the fabric bunched, and then she was running, slipping through the shadows and into his arms. For a moment, he couldn't believe this was happening to him. The girl, the moonlight, the music were like something from a movie.

Then her mouth, slippery with gloss, met his and he gave himself over to the heat of the moment. He forced her lips apart and thrust into her with his tongue. His heart pounded at the feel of her mouth all open to him. He ran his hands over the back of her dress, cupping her ass, fumbling for the opening. She twisted away and pulled his hand.

"Not here."

She led him through the pools of darkness behind the massed azaleas and around the curve of the hill by the Japanese waterfall garden to the villa. The moonlight smelled of carnations and roses.

The gauzy dress fell in a heap on the carpet. *Dios*, she felt good. Rounded breasts with nipples hard and taut, fingertips tugging at his buttons. He pushed her back on the satin-covered bed and jerked loose his belt buckle. She watched him with gleaming eyes.

He hadn't felt this wild, careening lust since the last time he'd had a virgin — a girl from down the street who died the next year with a needle in her arm.

He rode the hot bursting surge as it built and built until it hovered on the edge of pain. She cried out, something he couldn't understand, and arched upward, head so far back all he saw was the triangular outline of her jaw. He pulled out fast, just in time to squirt over her thigh.

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She grabbed his shoulder and yanked him over. Her nails dug into his skin. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Who told you to pull out?"

She pulled him on top of her again, her mound thrusting against his limp cock. Soon he got hard again with her ramming him back into her. She moaned and wet her lips as he ground away, but it was no good. His lower back cramped and his sweat turned cold. After a few minutes, she tightened her legs around him and gestured for him to roll over, with her on top. He'd seen that in movies but never done it before. It was hot, really hot, the way she twisted and fingered herself and jerked and screamed when she came.

He woke up shivering with a patch of moonlight on his face, feeling like he'd just washed up on a beach. The girl was asleep across his chest, her white hair spread out across his bare skin, one thigh across his groin. The weakness passed, leaving him cool and heady.

The girl stirred, perhaps roused by the change in his breathing. "Mm, that was all right."

He smoothed her hair. "I gotta get back. I got work in the morning."

She rolled on her side and began tracing circles around his nipple, dragging her nails across the skin and tugging the hairs that surrounded it in a sparse circle. "I thought you were supposed to keep the guests...happy."

"You happy?"

"Did they also tell you who I am?"

He'd found that out before dinner from two giggling cleaning girls. "Charity Bradford. Miss Charity Bradford."

"I think..." she murmured as he began stroking her, already wet, "I think I'll have you reassigned as my house boy...mm, oh yes, yes harder...take you away from here...oh, that's good...to my own...private...."

Just before dawn, Javier returned to the staff quarters where he shared a room with two other men. The hot shower made his skin itch, but he couldn't see anything — no sign of body lice, no rash. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, surprised at the dusky color of his face. Even his eyes looked red. He supposed all-night fucking did that to you.

He tossed his green shirt into the laundry chute, put on his second one and pinned on his name tag. This morning he was on kitchen duty, then cabins. Coffee, doughnuts and some kind of cardboard-colored mush had

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been set out in the staff area behind the kitchen. The smell of the food made his stomach churn. He took a sip of the coffee. Strong and bitter, it was the real stuff, but he couldn't force it down.

He carried stacks of dishes and tableware to the tables. After only a few loads, he was sweating cold and his heart thumped so hard he could hardly hear anything else. The clatter of the dishes sounded tinny and far off.

"You okay?" asked the head waiter, who was supervising the setting of the tables.

Javier shook his head. He set the tray of dishes down on the nearest table. His arms had turned to jelly. His vision whirled and his mouth tasted sour. He tried to say, "I don't need nobody's help," when suddenly the room slid sideways and he saw someone who looked like himself, wearing a sweat-darkened green shirt, crumple to the floor.

Javier woke up lying on a paper-sheeted table. Cabinets lined the walls and sunlight filtered through a frosted glass window. He raised his head and focused on a sink, a wheeled stool and a goose-necked floor lamp.

A middle-aged man in a doc's coat pushed the door open without knocking. He carried a slip of yellow lab paper in one hand.

"Javier Gonzalez?" He spoke with a faint accent and sounded as if he were in a hurry. "Have you been feeling ill or tired lately?"

"I been fine." Javier sat up, holding his breath as the room spun and then slowly settled down. "You know how it is on a new job, you work extra hard."

"Headaches? Visual disturbances? Itching, worse in a hot bath?"

Javier remembered the crawling sensation as the steamy shower beat down on him.

"How long has your skin been red?"

Javier started sweating. "I musta got sunburned yesterday on the boat."

"*Yesterday*?"

"Well, maybe a week. But it's just a long night and a sunburn, that's all."

The doc looked down at the lab slip again and suppressed a sigh. "No, I'm very much afraid that isn't all. While you were unconscious, we reran your intake tests to confirm the diagnosis. Have you ever heard of polycythemia?"

"Huh?"

"I didn't think so. The word means too many red blood cells. The blood's

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too thick and it forms clots that eventually kill the patient. It used to be that with treatment, the patient might live for years. Now we've got this new syndrome, which seems to be triggered by something in the untreated mainland water. It isn't contagious, if that's any concern to you. I won't insist on a medical discharge as long as you can work."

"Whoo-ah!" Javier held up his hands. His head whirled. "You telling me there's something wrong with my *blood*?"

The doc nodded.

"And it's gonna...gonna..."

"Kill you. Yes. It will kill you. As I said, what you will most likely die from is thrombosis, a blood clot lodging in your brain or heart."

"There's something you can do, isn't there? A cure?" The muscles of Javier's belly tightened.

"We can remove blood." The doc stared out the bank of windows that looked on to the eastern lawns. "It might buy you some time. Sometimes, once or twice in a thousand cases, there's a spontaneous remission. The only treatment recognized as effective is gene-replacement, which is," he paused, pursing his lips, "costly."

"But it works — there's something that *works*?"

"Of course it works!" the doc snapped, and for the first time looked directly at Javier. "Do you think the State would let citizen-firsts die of something like this?"

"But all those tests you did on me...." Javier said, still unbelieving. "How could they miss something like this?"

The doc's eyes glided past Javier. For a long moment he said nothing. In his silence, Javier understood that the tests had been only for the protection of the Island patrons.

"Come in back, we'll get started with the phlebotomy, the blood-letting," the doc said. "Every other day until your hematocrit values come down. You'll feel better for a week or two, maybe a month. But in your case, with the speed of onset..." He paused, his lips working, then added in a tired voice. "I wouldn't expect much more."

Javier lay on the table in the staff clinic room, clenching and unclenching his fist. He was alone. The Latino tech, the same one who'd run the tests when he'd first come to the Island, had set him up and left him. A coldness

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spread upwards from the needle in his arm. His blood ran through a clear tube into a bag out of his line of sight. He didn't know what would happen to it when they were done.

He'd grown up knowing that any day he could be slashed up in a knife fight or shot by the cartel runners. He'd imagined his life running out with his blood, flowing over the cracked pavement, turning the street into a lake of red. He saw Mama dipping her fingers into it, heard her sobbing, *"Ay, Javier, no! Not my son, my son...."*

After a time, the tech came back and removed the needle. As he pressed a patch bandage over the puncture site, his eyes flickered over Javier's.

"The docs don't know everything," he said, his voice a rasping whisper. "All their fancy therapies are just for rich Anglos. They never bother with anything else. There are other ways. The clinics in Ensenada. And I hear that sometimes the thing just burns itself out — "

Javier shook his head and stood up, cutting the man off. "Thanks, but I'm gonna make it just fine."

AFTER WORK there was Charity, waiting for him on the little porch outside her villa. She wore a kimono of patterned pink and gold, and her eyes were ringed with circles of the same colors.

Javier took her into his arms and pulled her into the rose-smelling cave. He slipped one hand inside her kimono and felt her nipples harden. There was a moist hot crescent under each breast, as if someone had licked her there.

"I'm sorry I was such a bitch last night — about your pulling out and all," she said, laughing softly. "You don't need to, you know. I've had the contraceptive shots." She started unbuttoning his shirt.

"I take care of my women," he said, his voice husky. He was already hard and the way she tugged at his belt drove him crazy. His head felt as if it would burst and his heart pounded like mad.

This time they didn't even make it to the bed. He stayed inside her and she came again and again on the thick pale carpet.

At the end of the week, Javier felt so good he stopped going in for the blood drains. The doc must have made a mistake — what did he know, anyway? Or maybe it was one of those miracle cures.

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In the daytime, he worked beaches, meal cleanups and villas, stripping the vacated rooms before the cleaning girls came and then setting all the details after they'd done. The Namese even loosened up enough to tell him he was doing a good job.

Charity went ashore for three days, without any warning. She'd left all her belongings in the villa, even the apricot tree, so Javier knew she had to be coming back. Yet he paused whenever he got a clear view of the guest pier, stealing a few moments to watch for the boat. Finally he saw her get off and the knotted tension in his belly eased.

It was well after dark when he finished work and knocked at her door. In answer, she screamed at him in a language he didn't know, French or Russian maybe. Just as he turned away, the door swung open and she peeked out. The blackout drapes had been drawn tight, engulfing the room behind her in shadow.

She motioned for him to come in. For a moment he thought, *To hell with her, I'd rather sleep.* And there was something about the room that didn't smell right. As he closed the door behind him and she toppled into his arms, he realized what it was. She reeked of opal-dust, nasty stuff that gave bizarre erotic visions when sprinkled over naked skin. It cost a bundle and could turn mean when mixed with enhancers.

He half-dragged, half-carried her to the bed and collapsed next to her on the rumpled satin. She curled her fingers around his shirt and twisted, pulling herself across his chest. He put his arms around her.

"Damned backlash," she moaned. "Every time, I swear it'll be the last. But *you're* here now." She sighed and abruptly fell asleep.

Javier lay with Charity's weight across his ribs as his body got heavier and deader. The darkness didn't change when he closed his eyes.

He opened them some time later and sat up. The nightstand light was on, filling the room with a peach-rose glow. Charity lay beside him, propped up on one elbow. His shirt was gone. He thought it was still night, but couldn't be sure.

Charity fingered the bullet as it swung from his neck on its chain. She stared at it as if she'd never seen it before. "What's this? A souvenir?"

He closed his fingers around hers. His thoughts moved slowly. *Out,* he had to get out.

"From that scar on your back? It's all right to tell me, you know." Her

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pale eyes looked opaque, like gravestone marble. He tried to get up, but she wouldn't let go of the bullet.

Suddenly she pushed him away and went to the dresser, dug in the piles of lace and silk for a pouch of gold-stitched brocade. It was long and thin, heavier than he expected when she jerked the drawstring loose and slid it out into his hand.

"That's it," she said, "the thing that almost killed me."

Javier looked down at six inches of steel, hinged and folded like a knife. He touched the handles inlaid with mother-of-pearl and something smooth and creamy.

"Real ivory," Charity said. "Can you imagine, some elephant died to make this thing?" She took the knife and snapped it open. "Maybe the last one there ever was."

The light glinted off the squared blade. "It's called a cut-throat razor," she went on. "And it damned near cut mine, except I made a mess of it. The scars are gone now, the plastic surgeons saw to that."

Slowly she ran her hand along the razor's edge and watched the blood welling up in a narrow line. Javier had seen cuts like that — the sharper the knife, the longer they bled. She probably couldn't even feel it yet. He caught the expression on her face, the mixture of horror and fascination as one dark drop after another fell on her sheer gown. He grabbed the razor from her and folded it closed.

Javier had helped the Namese restock the medicine cabinets with the usual toiletries and sanitary supplies — and packets of styptic powder for those gentlemen who still shaved with blades. He brought out several, along with bandages. Charity held out her hand like a child as he sprinkled it over the cut. The blood clotted immediately.

He swabbed her hand with disinfectant and bandaged it. "You shouldn't be playing with this." He held up the folded razor. "You could really hurt yourself."

"That was the idea, wasn't it?" Then she gulped and looked away. "You know, I think you're right. I don't really...I can't trust myself with it." She shivered. "You keep it for me."

"Me?"

"And I'll keep this." She curled her fingers around the bullet and tugged. The chain bit into his skin.

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Javier's muscles hardened in denial. The razor, even if the ivory wasn't real, was worth a bundle, and the bullet....

She slipped the chain over his neck. "I need something to remind me that I'm not alone. That I have someone I can count on." Her eyes searched his. "We all need that, don't we?"

The bone-tiredness crept back deeper day by day, despite Javier's efforts to ignore it. It was lack of sleep, he told himself. Awake half the night with Charity and then up before dawn, working the beach cleanup crew, that was all.

Every morning he raked the powdery sand, scrubbed the chairs and tables with rust suppressant, swept the walkways. To be outdoors and yet protected was still new enough to bring its own pleasures. Once he found a gold dangle earring beneath one of the lounge cushions. The crew head told him to take it to Gibson's office.

She weighed the glittering trinket in her hand before placing it in the lockbox in her desk. Javier stood, fists at his sides, watching. What did she think, he'd tried to steal it?

"You've passed your probation." Gibson held out an envelope. "There's your pay. You're also entitled to one free passage to the mainland each month, but you have to tell me if you're taking your two half-days off together so I can shift schedules."

Javier imagined himself on the boat, approaching the pier. The dusty beachfront hotels blending with the burnt-grass hills. And Mama's face when he gave her the money. His memory wavered, blurring her image. Something held him, some invisible tie, as if the bullet chain still hung around his neck. He told himself this was a bad time to leave Charity, just when she needed him. He was a man who took care of his women.

"Next time, maybe. Keep it on my account."

"You can have it sent to the mainland, you know. Wired direct to a checking account or—" her voice softened imperceptibly, "—there are ways of sending cash."

"How much?"

"Ten percent off the top, but it'll get there. The captain's honest."

Javier nodded and gave Mama's address. Gibson put the pay packet away. "One thing more..." she said. "The doc says you've missed your last three clinic appointments."

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What do you care what happens to me? Javier stared at her, his muscles tightening. The only reason she hadn't chucked him like Pointy-Toes was that he couldn't give anything contagious to her precious guests. "I can take care of myself."

"Can you? You're all so young, so arrogant." She paused, her lips narrowing and her eyes going blank as if she were no longer talking to him. "You think getting out of the *barrio* is the hard part. You think that once you're out, nothing worse can ever happen to you."

His next free half-day, Javier want back to the staff clinic and mentioned how tired he was. "We can take more blood, for all the good it'll do," the doc said. "Or you could try one of the free clinics on the mainland. But if it were me...." He shrugged and turned away.

It's not the end, Javier thought. *I still got time. I still got Charity.*

She'd just stepped out of a shower and wrapped herself in a pale-peach towel, with another around her head. She wore his bullet around her neck, next to her skin. She saw him outside the sliding door and sat at the vanity table with her back to him, watching him in the mirror.

He crossed the carpet to stand behind her. Dizziness touched him with icy fingers. The room slipped, steadied.

"Something's wrong," she said, twisting around on the stool to face him.

"I just seen the doc — "

"Shit!" She leapt to her feet. "What kind of crud did you give me? You're *supposed* to be screened!"

"No! It's not catching. The doc, he says — "

"What is it, then?"

"Something called poly — poly — "

"Polycythemia?" Pursing her lips, she crossed to the bed. "Where will they send you, the Camarillo Hospice?"

He sat beside her and felt her thighs naked beneath the towels. She looked up at him as he cupped her face and kissed her. Caressed her lips, stroked her mouth with his tongue until he heard her breath quicken. The towel loosened and fell away.

"It's so good what we have together," he murmured. "I love you, Charity."

"Love me. Yes."

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"And I would keep on loving you...if only..."

"The genetic treatment, you mean."

"The doc says it works..." He started down the side of her neck, little kisses that sent her shivering, "but it costs..."

He worked his way past her breasts, down across her belly as she lay back and spread her legs wide for him. "I'd pay you back, you know that. And I'd be with you...whenever you want me...doing this...and this:..."

"Oh yes. Oh yes, yes...."

When Javier left her, she didn't even open her eyes. He drew the sheets over her naked body. Tiredness dragged at him, but he hardly felt it. He'd done it, fucked her brains out. To hell with the doc — to hell with all of them. He and Charity would blow the Island and he'd be set.

A survivor, that's what he was. Out of the *barrio* and on to the beach.

Hauling himself out of bed before dawn the next morning was hell, as if he weighed a million pounds. He felt better after he'd eaten and finished the breakfast shift. Villa clean-up was busy that morning. A bunch of guests had checked out, more were arriving in the afternoon, and the shift was short-handed. The third villa they did was Charity's.

Javier stood in the doorway and stared at the silent room. He took a step inside. It still smelled of her perfume. He could see where she'd lain on the rumpled sheets, how she'd pushed them aside getting up. The towels in the bathroom were damp, the potted apricot tree gone.

The Namese pushed past him and began ripping the sheets off the bed, bundling them for the cleaning girls. He emptied the flower bowls, tossing the still-lush blossoms in the trash.

In the top drawer of the dresser, Javier found an envelope, thick creamy paper, addressed to him. Inside was a month's wages and a note which read, "Keep the razor. You'll need it."

Cold seeped up Javier's legs from the pale-peach carpet. He dashed down the path to the little vista of the beach. The boat had already pulled away from the pier.

Something inside of Javier screamed, *Bitch!* His chest heaved, his eyes swam with red. *Bitch! I'll get you for this, bitch!*

Then he was running, the sea wind whistling in his ears, down past the kitchen and the snowball azaleas, down to the beach. He sped past the

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bathers, sheltered beneath the billowing uv-canopies. None of the guests looked up. The boat's triangular wake made a shadow against the glare of the waves.

Javier's chest burned with each breath. His vision turned blurry and gray. Without conscious thought, his hands clenched into fists. He thought of Charity's face and how he wanted to smash it. He saw blood bursting from those soft full lips, saw them split apart like overripe fruit, felt her teeth splinter, saw her blue eyes widen and bulge.

Pain in his hand brought Javier back to his body. He was clutching the folded razor so tightly his muscles had cramped.

Waves lapped at his ankles. He snapped the razor open and traced a line in his skin. Like a man in a dream, he stared at his hand. The line looked white for an instant before it welled up with bright blood. His heartbeat slowed. He cut again, deeper this time, and watched the blood seep out. There was no pain.

Javier shook his hand and a drop of blood fell into the foamy green water. For a moment, he saw the ocean turn the color of blood, saw dark red waves sweep across the beach and drench the sand, all that fine rich white sand.

He pictured himself standing on the boat, looking back at the beach, pictured the guests' faces. Heard their cries as they tried to scrub the stains from their feet.

It would be so easy to keep on, slashing deeper and deeper into his flesh, filling the ocean with his blood. But that was Charity's way out, the one she'd chosen for him. Only there would be no fancy doctors to stitch him back together.

If I'm gonna die, it's not gonna be on some damned rich lady's beach.

A throb of pain brought him back to the present, from a trickle of sweat running into the cut. The blood was already beginning to clot. He had, without thinking, folded the razor closed.

Javier put it in his pocket and walked slowly up the trail to the main lodge. He met the Namese with the cart of cleaning supplies and they stood there for a moment. The Namese said in his soft, whispering voice, "What you do now?"

"Go home," said Javier. *Die.*

"Family. Is best — family." The Namese reached into his shirt pocket and took out an old-style laminated photograph. Javier made out a row of

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solemn-looking old people crammed together on a sofa, a few adults standing or crouching beside them, and children on everyone's laps. He wondered if the Namese's pay supported them all.

Javier continued up the path. As if for the first time, he noticed the gleaming paint on the benches, the newly weeded flower beds, the pristine gravel of the path. There was not a scrap of litter, not a faded leaf, not a pebble out of place. He thought of all the people whose work it was to keep things that way.

S. Gibson looked up from a stack of papers as he knocked on the opened door and entered her office. Before, the room had seemed a windowless cell. Now he was struck by how impersonal it was, and how bare. She had no pictures anywhere, not on the walls, not on her desk. No flowers, either. Just racks and piles of papers, a cup of pens and one of paper clips. The upholstery of her chair had been worn through around the edges, the only sign a real person ever sat there.

"I'm going home," he said.

For a moment she said nothing, just stared at him. He noticed the tightness in her mouth, the shadows around her eyes that even her heavy makeup could not hide. She took out a ring of keys and unlocked her desk drawer. "You have some additional pay coming," she said. And, he reminded himself, there was the extra money from Charity. Maybe he could find some mainland doc —

No, he thought. The money was for Mama, for his sister Ana and the baby, if he was still alive. Javier was a man who took care of his family.

"The boat will take you over this afternoon," Gibson said, each word bitten off.

"Thank you." He paused, for a moment not sure if he should ask, half-expecting her to accuse him of theft. But what more did he have to lose now? His job, his life? He held out the razor. "You know someplace I could get money for this?"

She picked it up, ran her fingertips over the handle. "It's antique, worth something with this ivory. Try Rosten's on Wilshire, West City. Say you're from the Island. A lot of our people sell things there, no questions asked. They won't give you top dollar, but they won't cheat you blind, either." She wrote the name down on a piece of paper and slid it with the razor across the desk

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to him. "A family could live for a year in the *barrio* on that. But it won't buy you the genetic therapy." Something in her voice said, *No amount of money can.*

As Javier's fingers closed around the razor, his mouth curved into a smile. "I got everything I need."

THE CAPTAIN let Javier watch from the deck as the boat pulled away from the Tierra Flores dock and then, almost apologetically, said he must go below. He was the only staff member returning that trip and he had the porthole all to himself. He braced himself against the movement of the boat and watched the waves spatter against the salt-pitted glass.

After a while, Javier sat down and closed his eyes. He couldn't feel the boat going anywhere, just swaying like a cheap carnival ride while the ocean rose up around him, vast and deep and colder than he'd imagined possible.

Javier must have dozed off, for the next thing he knew, the heaving motion of the boat had stopped. He picked up the plastic bag with the few things he'd brought with him and touched the pocket where the razor rested. It was still there, along with the envelope tucked under his belt.

Outside, seagulls dove in circles, crying out to one another. The sun hurt Javier's eyes as he clambered on to the dock. He'd forgotten how bright it was out here, with the unscreened light reflecting off the concrete. Across the landing, past the guest gazebo with its uv-canopy and trailing roses, men with dark, anxious faces pressed up against the wire fence. Their fingers hooked through the chain links. They drew back as one of the boat crew unlocked the gate. As Javier pushed his way past them, one touched his arm in a way that made him pause.

"Anything for the Lopez family?"

"Sorry."

At the edge of the crumbling pavement, Javier took a deep breath, smelled bird shit and rust. One of the hopefuls trudged toward him, a sun-withered man with gray in his hair and a knife scar across one cheek.

"No luck this time?" Javier asked.

"There's too many, like always. Some been waiting since last night. You know how it is, you go out every day and it's always the same. But you got to do it anyway. What about you, man? You get kicked out or something?"

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Laughter bubbled up in Javier's chest and sent him coughing. He reeled and put out one hand to steady himself on one of the sun-screen posts. His hand met something solid, but he felt nothing. The world went gray and cold. He couldn't catch his breath properly.

No, it's too soon. I'm not home yet.

Something warm and solid caught him, buoyed him up. His vision steadied. The hopeful ducked his head as he swung one of Javier's arms over his own shoulders. Javier pulled back, although he felt almost too dizzy to stand. A man without a job might steal for what was in another man's pockets, or might kill for it. But the black eyes which met his were clear and honest, the voice resonant with a familiar cadence. "Just get me to the tram stop," Javier said. "I can make it on my own from there."

As he rode along at the back of the tram car, Javier's right arm went numb, as if it no longer belonged to him. Richly textured patterns flowed past his eyes, the coils of rusted barbed wire that marked the East City boundary, graffiti, tattoo blue and russet against the softness of stucco turning to powder, the peppering of bullet holes on walls. Javier was struck with the feeling he had never seen these things before. He wondered if he were really dying or if it was only that the Island had in some treacherous way left its mark on him.

For a long moment after he got off the tram, Javier stood on the sidewalk and stared, as if he'd suddenly found himself in the middle of a strange neighborhood with no idea how he'd gotten there. None of the shops with their baskets of backyard-grown avocados, lemons, and fresh chiles looked familiar. On the other side of the street, shaded by the shop awnings, old men sat in a row, drinking from bottles in plastic bags. As a trio of boys darted from the nearby alley, one of the men called out to one of them, "*Hola*, Chico! Your Mama's been looking for you."

A few feet from Javier, two women in long-sleeved dresses and straw hats chattered in Spanish, bargaining for vegetables and packets of lard. One held a toddler by the hand, its face shiny with cheap sunblock. The other balanced a baby on her hip. Suddenly the baby convulsed, coughing and gasping. The sound of the air wheezing through its tiny lungs sent a shiver of fear through Javier. He thought of Ana's baby, of her joy at his birth and the awful hurting craziness that ate into her day by day as she watched her child grow weaker.

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You gotta make it, baby. You gotta make it for both of us.

The baby might very well die, of course, just like Javier on any day of his life. Even if he survived the lung crud, he could be caught by a bullet or end up running with the dopers. But for today, all he needed was a chance. Not even an edge, just a chance.

The closer Javier got to the apartment on Temple Street, the more flashes of familiarity came to him, as if these shambling buildings with their patches of weeds and abandoned automobiles occupied a more tenacious hold on his memory. Even the air smelled stronger out here.

A cartel lookout stood on the corner, face patterned with stripes of blue and white zinc oxide and Uzi pistol in plain sight. He squinted at Javier and suddenly Javier's ears rang with the memory of gunfire and his body jerking and spinning and slamming to the pavement. Mama had found him before the ambulancers came and even now he heard her broken whispers.

Ay, Javier...my son...

But this time Javier was not lying in the street in a pool of his own blood, he was limping down it. He felt stiff, fragile, trapped in an old man's body. But somewhere in the back of his mind, Mama still wept for him. There was nothing he could buy for her that would take that memory away. What did she want with a pale peach room or a pair of fancy shoes? She wanted him, him and never the money. She had been right to fear for him when he left for the Island.

Thinking this, Javier felt stronger, as if some of her old woman's stubbornness flowed into him. She would fight for him and hold on to him, right up to the very last breath. She would never let go, never. She would struggle, she would pray, she would ply him with her own *chile diablo*, that she swore would frighten away demons, until he had a gut on him the size of a watermelon. She would go clear to Ensenada for snake oil and folk remedies —

Ensenada.

In a flash, Javier remembered what the medical tech had said, how he'd waited until they were alone, as if passing a secret. *There are other ways*, he'd said. At the time, Javier had been so fired-up, he hadn't wanted to listen. But what if the tech were right, what if the thing sometimes burned itself out or there were some other treatment?

Would the Island clinic doc have told him? Would the doc have even

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known about anything else? All the guests were rich enough to afford the fancy gene therapy.

Javier halted at the bottom of the outdoor stairs, breathing hard. He had to get up them. He had to find a way. He was too close to give up now. In the end, he left the plastic bag on the ground and used his good hand to haul himself up by the rusted metal railing, sucking in his breath with every step.

The apartment door swung open before Javier reached it. Music blared away inside. Ana stood there, mouth opened in surprise, but for that first instant, he didn't see her against the shadowed room. He saw only the laughing, rosy-cheeked baby in her arms. A bubble of milk rested in the corner of his mouth. His eyes were so clear that looking into them was like looking up at a starless night.

For a moment, Javier dared not breathe. He climbed the final step and reached out with his good hand to see if the baby were real or only something he'd wished for so hard he'd made it so. The baby grabbed one of his fingers. His skin against Javier's was moist and surprisingly soft.

Ana turned her head and shouted, "Mama!" The next instant, Mama appeared beside her, eyes glittering, mouth straight. She started chattering away in Spanish, the sound of her voice drowned in the noise of the radio and a dog which had started barking in the street below. When she stepped forward and took Javier into her arms, she smelled of soap and spices and herself, smells he remembered from his childhood.

Javier looked down at his hand. He could still feel the imprint of the baby's touch, as if it were flesh of his own flesh, bone of his own bone, blood of his own blood. It was the strongest thing he'd ever felt, that lingering touch. Stronger than all the things that had almost killed him — the smashed-up bullet, the red fury on the beach.

It would stay with him for the rest of his life.

Javier closed his eyes and rested his head against his mother's shoulder. Weariness dropped from him. Everything seemed to come clear at last. "Mama," he whispered, "I'm home."

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SCIENCE

YOURS, ISAAC ASIMOV

EDITED BY STANLEY ASIMOV

The following excerpts come from Yours, Isaac Asimov: A Lifetime of Letters, *edited by Stanley Asimov, published by Doubleday:*

Youth

Isaac would occasionally write about his younger years.

26 March 1969

When I was young, my family was too poor to buy books, but library cards were free. From the age of six, I have haunted the library, and the books I read educated me before the schools got their chance.

While I went to school, library books taught me what school did not and when I finished with my formal education, books kept right on educating me. If you use the library, there is no charge, either.

30 October 1962

In the early 1930s, I belonged to the Brooklyn Public Library *and* the Queens Public Library because I lived on the boundary of the two boroughs. The Queens Public Library branch was a full two miles away, but I used to walk there and back regardless of the weather every week. I once walked it when the temperature was in the single numbers and never thought it odd. It was just cold. So I bundled up. My mother let me go without a thought about it either (one advantage of having been brought up in Russia).

10 January 1959

I never had an electric train or a two-wheeled bicycle or a Hula-Hoop or any but the smallest Erector Set. But I'm lucky. When I was 11 years old, my parents listened to a suggestion I made and for my birthday got me a copy of the World Almanac. As a measure of our level of economic welfare, it cost 50 cents and my father swung a deal to get it wholesale

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(i.e., at 40 cents) and was greatly relieved at being able to save a dime.

I wouldn't swap that World Almanac for all the electric trains in the world. I spent hours (literally) poring over every word it contained and when I got tired reading the statistics, I got my parents to invest in a sheaf of graph paper, and I prepared line graphs and bar graphs of them.

This accomplished several things. (1) It kept me out of my parents' hair. (2) It kept me deliriously happy. (3) And thanks to my near-photographic memory (I can remember things near photographs), I salted away a mess of stuff I could use later on in stories and articles.

2 May 1965

If my parents were small-scale merchants, they nevertheless took it for granted I was going to be a "learned man." So I took it for granted, too. However, a childhood spent in "playing games" and "doing nothing" is not to be sneezed at, by the way.

While my childhood was not seriously deprived or really tragic, it was nevertheless not a particularly happy one. This was not through the fault of my hardworking parents, but entirely because I did not fit well into the society of my peers. There is a price to pay for everything.

9 September 1961

When I was a youngster, whenever I went to a movie with my father (which was rare), he always turned to me when we emerged and asked, "Well, Isaac, wot did you loined?"

22 March 1973

In the early 1930s, I used to look forward to Fourth of July the way most people looked forward to Christmas. For a week, everyone shot off firecrackers. My family was too poor to get me anything but a few strings of "half-inchers," which I could set off on the windowsill. But I could always watch the other wealthier kids set off their inch-and-a-halfers, their cherry bombs and, if I was ultra-lucky, their rockets.

2 February 1966

The 1930s were my decade. I read Krazy Kat and the Rover Boys, and I knew about the Louis-Schmeling fight.

8 April 1969

I do *not* know Hebrew. Oh, when I was eight years old, I spent four months or so in a Hebrew school and that was enough to teach me to *read* Hebrew, and since my memory is what it is, I have never forgotten. I also remember some of the vocabulary I then learned and some that I

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have picked up by osmosis here and there in my reading.

3 February 1977

My parents did not abandon Yiddish, but continued to speak it for years. In fact, I myself learned Yiddish and can speak it fairly fluently. I can understand it almost as well as I can understand English. At the present moment, I am thoroughly bilingual in English and Yiddish in that I can think in either without having to translate from one to the other. I can speak German fairly well, largely thanks to Yiddish. In a pinch, I could make myself understood in French if it were a life-and-death case. I have a surprisingly large vocabulary in Greek and Latin, largely thanks to my etymological work, but can't handle the words at all in sentences in either language.

11 November 1988

When I was about ten years old, there were a number of books I loved. There was *Tom Sawyer*, for instance (but not *Huckleberry Finn*, which I learned to love as an adult). There were the various Penrod books by Booth Tarkington (I felt a kinship with "bad boys" for some reason); there were various books by E. Nesbit, with my favorite by all odds *The Story of the Amulet*, and the various Dr. Dolittle books by Hugh Lofting, with *The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle* my favorite.

If, however, we judge a book as favorite by counting the number of times it was read and reread, my all-time favorite was none of these. Indeed, it was not a children's book (by the usual definitions) at all. But I didn't' know that. My parents were immigrants who couldn't read English at that time and who didn't know English language literature. They obtained a library card for me but could do nothing more, and I read anything I could persuade the librarians to let me have. I tried to get the long books because they lasted a longer time. And I found *Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens.

I read it and reread it and reread it. It's an actual fact and not exaggeration that I read it 25 times before I was out of my teens. Since then I have read just about all of Dickens (and *Nicholas Nickleby* is my second favorite), but I have never wavered as to what is in first place. I still reread *Pickwick Papers*. I reread it, first word to last, only last month, and I enjoyed it just as much as ever, even though I can close my eyes at any point and continue reading.

9 April 1987

During my childhood as a member of an ambitious but very poor immi-

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grant family, I did all my reading and obtained nine-tenths of my learning in the public library. It frightens me to think what I might have become — and what I might have *failed* to become — without one.

25 April 1985

I believe most of my teachers considered me a pain in the neck and did not enjoy seeing me in their classes. I was a disruptive influence and a disciplinary problem. My huge and incredibly vicious crime was that I would tend to whisper to my neighbors in class. For this I was endlessly disciplined.

There was nothing they could really do to me, however, for I was also far and away the brightest kid in the class — and the youngest. Heaven only knows what they wrote about me in the records, but it was no secret what they thought of me. The other kids could hear the teachers yelling at me. It probably saved my life. If I had been extraordinarily bright *and* a teacher's pet, the kids would probably have killed me.

I was very happy at school. I enjoyed being bright. I enjoyed baiting the teachers. I wouldn't do anything differently.

19 May 1967

When I was in my early teens, I went through a period of enormous interest in baseball. At the beginning of the season, I would buy a large notebook and prepare 154 complicated tables in which I could put a set of double-entry standings with complete scores. It was fascinating. The only trouble was that I practically never went to see any games and when I did go, it was 55 cents for a bleacher seat in the beating rays of the sun half a mile from home plate.

The most remarkable occasion of my attending a game was Memorial Day 1938 (I believe), when Carl Hubbell had won 24 games in a row and was up for his 25th. He was knocked out of the box. What a harrowing experience for me. Carl Hubbell was my all-time baseball hero. I sat there desolate — convinced that it had happened only because I was in the stands. After all, when I hadn't been in the stands, he had won 24 games. I can see him right now, walking off the field.

11 April 1981

What I enjoyed most in high school were those courses I found easiest: chemistry, history, mathematics, English. I don't think that my English teacher or anyone else (except me) saw that I was going to be a successful writer someday. Even I never guessed how successful I would be. But then, the surprises in life are

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the best part. If everything were cut and dried, how dull it would be.

10 November 1989

I have only one piece of published juvenilia. It is an essay entitled "Little Brothers," written when I was 14 and published in the spring 1934 issue of my high school literary magazine, also when I was 14.

The faculty adviser accepted it with the worst possible grace because it was the only offering that attempted to be funny. And he told me so quite bluntly.

His opinion of my writing ability was rock-bottom, and I don't know if he lived long enough to realize that he was badly mistaken. Fortunately, regardless of his opinion, I already knew, at the age of 14, that I was a great writer. So I didn't require his approval at all.

Prominent People

Over the years, Isaac developed contacts with a number of prominent people.

He had a 30-year correspondence with Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling. Pauling read Isaac's science articles in Fantasy & Science Fiction *magazine regularly and wrote Isaac whenever he found an error. No writer could ever ask for a more prestigious "editor."*

Here are some excerpts from their letters.

From Pauling to Isaac:

3 June 1963

I was pleased to learn from the July issue of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* that you have included me among the 72 scientists whom you call great.

I looked through the list to see how many of the 72 are still alive, and I found four. This is why I am writing to you. You have indicated one of the four as having died in 1960. The man about whom you have made a mistake is Louis de Broglie. He is still alive. It was his brother Maurice who died in 1960.

From Isaac to Pauling:

11 June 1963

It was a completely unexpected delight to hear from you. Somehow it had never occurred to me that any of the subjects of my article "The Isaac Winners" might see it. But I'm glad you did. At least, it makes quite public my sincere belief that you are one of the four greatest living scientists.

I am quite embarrassed at having mistakenly killed poor de Broglie, and I can assure you I have unkilled him. It was the result of a too hasty reference to my Webster's Biographical Dictionary.

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Oddly enough, I have avoided the error elsewhere. I have just completed a 400,000-word history of science in which, I assure you, you are appropriately represented. I checked at once on de Broglie, and I find that there I have kept him alive.

From Pauling to Isaac:

9 August 1978

I am writing now about your article in the September 1978 issue *of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. On page 123, you say that Amontons and Gay-Lussac observed that if a gas at the freezing point of water, O° C, is decreased in temperature to -1° C, then both the volume and the pressure of the gas will decline by 1/273 of the temperature.

This statement and the rest of the discussion on this page are wrong. What you should have said is that if the volume is kept constant, the pressure decreases by 1/273, and if the pressure is kept constant, the volume decreases by 1/273. If for some reason the fractional decrease in volume were kept the same as the fractional decrease in pressure, each of them would be 1/546.

I hope you are keeping as busy as ever.

From Isaac to Pauling:

21 August 1978

It is always with mingled pride and apprehension that I realize you have your eye on me.

I have been too long away from thermodynamics to remember to specify the variables that must be held constant, and I shall, of course, correct the matter when the essay appears in book form.

You remain my favorite scientist, and may you continue to flourish for seven more decades at least.

From Pauling to Isaac:

17 January 1989

Perhaps it gives me some pleasure to think that you are not infallible.

A little over six years ago, I noticed a mistake in one of your papers. I judge that I decided not to write to you about it, but on running across it again today I decided that I should do so. In *Fantasy & Science Fiction* for October 1982, you have an article in which, on page 135, you say, "To begin with, we must understand that a double bond is weaker than a single bond." [Pauling then describes Isaac's explanation.]

This is all wrong. By various criteria, a double bond is found to be

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about twice as strong as a single bond. All of this can be found in my book *The Nature of the Chemical Bond.* [Pauling then provides Isaac with a scientific explanation.]

From Isaac to Pauling:

20 January 1989

Chalk up one more mistake I'll never make again. (Unfortunately, I keep thinking up brand-new mistakes.) How fortunate I am to have you as a friend.

From Pauling to Isaac:

26 May 1989

I am pleased to report that I have found another place where you have slipped.

In *Fantasy & Science Fiction* for July 1989, page 102, you discuss the Doppler effect. You mention a train approaching you and say, "All the waves of compression are closer together than they should have been if the train had been standing still. That means that the wavelength is longer and you perceive the pitch as being lower." It should, of course, read, "That means that the wavelength is shorter and you perceive the pitch as being higher."

From Isaac to Pauling:

2 June 1989

My dear wife also caught that error in explaining the Doppler effect.

What happened was that the damned typesetter left out a line or two. I caught it in galleys and inserted the line or two and then the typesetter *ignored the correction.* I don't mind making a mistake and being corrected, but it *does* bother one to have someone else make the mistake and make you look like a fool. But it happens to all of us.

From Pauling to Isaac:

15 October 1991

For years I have admired you for your very broad knowledge of science and ability to present it in a remarkable way to a general group of readers, including your use of excellent English. It is on this last matter that I am now writing to you.

In the [May 1990 issue of *Fantasy & Science Fiction],* you refer to the "escapees," in this case people who are escaping from the cities. I join with authorities on the English language in deploring this usage. Fowler's *Modern English Usage,* second edition, 1965, says, "Escapee is a *superfluous word* that should not be

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allowed to usurp the place of *escaper*. One might as well call deserters *desertees*. "

Unfortunately, by October 1991, Isaac was no longer well enough to answer letters — even from Linus Pauling. There was no reply to this letter.

For more than 25 years, Isaac and Carl Sagan were good friends.

22 March 1966

Carl Sagan has read half through my book on the universe and has caught one fundamental error so far. In my rendering of Eddington's theories on stellar structure, I talked of radiation pressure. Apparently, I didn't have to. Fortunately, it just means correcting a sentence here and there.

But that's what I need Sagan for. Anything he doesn't catch isn't there to be caught. If only he were a little faster about it. I said to him that I realized he was awfully busy, too, but then I added with my particular brand of ingenuousness, "But then, what is your work compared to mine?"

And he said, "You say it in such a way that I can take it as a joke. But you really mean it, don't you?"

So I made the best of it. I said, "Yes, I do." A very smart fellow, that Sagan.

24 August 1966

Tomorrow I will visit Carl Sagan at the Harvard Observatory to see what resources the library has that may help me in possibly putting together a collection of material on the Moon. I asked Carl if there were any youngster at the observatory who wouldn't mind advising me in this respect and he answered, "Yes. Me."

I said I wouldn't think of bothering him for such an unimportant matter, and I really meant some graduate student who would find it fun, perhaps, and wouldn't mind helping out an aging s.f. writer. He said he would find it fun and wouldn't mind helping out an aging s.f. writer. So he will.

Here's a sampling of Isaac's letters to Sagan:

15 December 1973

I have just finished *The Cosmic Connection* and loved every word of it. You are my idea of a good writer because you have an unmannered style, and when I read what you write, I hear you talking.

One thing about the book made me nervous. It was entirely too obvious that you are smarter than I am. I hate that.

23 May 1976

I cannot conceive a situation in which

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I would find myself in disagreement with you on matters of science (and almost on anything else, either).

[Isaac then referred to a draft statement written by Sagan for the International Astronomical Union on astrology that said, in part, that astrology didn't treat humans as individuals and was a "doctrine akin to racism and sexism."]

I find your statement on astrology perfect. It is not as I would have written it. I would have written a savage, contemptuous denunciation. Yours is much better, of course.

15 June 1985

I just heard your talk on nuclear winter on Public Broadcasting. I am so proud of you, I almost burst with it. It was absolutely the sanest best speech I could imagine on the subject. It delighted me so much to find that I was on your side in every sentence of your talk.

And on the occasion of Sagan's marriage in 1980, Isaac wrote him a limerick:

Undated

Three loud cheers for Carl Sagan and Ann
Who today have become wife and man.
Be your lives bright as day
As the broad Milky Way
As the Big Bang with which all began.

Science Fiction — II

In 1958, after writing the Foundation Trilogy and many other science fiction books, Isaac stopped writing science fiction. He explained his action in this letter to John W. Campbell, Jr.:

16 October 1958

It's been half a year since I've written a word of science fiction. It's not because I'm dried up; or tired of writing. It's just because since the beginning of 1958, I have written a book on the derivation of scientific words, another one on numbers, another one on man's notions of time, another one on blood and its functions, and I'm just finishing one on the solar system. I'm working on a few others, too.

In short, it's all nonfiction, and please don't be angry with me because it was the *Astounding* articles that introduced me to the writing of easygoing nonfiction. You, sir, have corrupted me.

To fellow science fiction writer Robert Bloch, he wrote:

27 March 1959

At Doubleday, I officially canceled the

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s.f. novel I was supposed to write last year. For an indefinite period henceforward, s.f. and I will have pf-f-ft. The theory is I have to wait for the urge to write nonfiction to subside. The fear is that the urge to write nonfiction will subside, but that the urge to write fiction will nevertheless not return.

Nonetheless, Isaac remained a strong supporter of science fiction.

2 October 1961

This morning I wrote an article entitled "Who Won the Hugo," which is intended for The New York Times Magazine. It is on science fiction conventions, and it may not make it. I have a feeling that the editor may be expecting a humorous article poking fun at science fiction fans. In the letter she wrote me, she did say, "We are looking for a tone that is generally on the light, entertaining side."

Well, I made it that. I put in a number of light and entertaining touches. But I also did two other things. I presented science fiction fandom in a rather poignantly heroic light, something like Henry V saying, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers...." And I also very quietly and gradually led the reader into seeing the true and important significance of science fiction until, by the end, I was speaking in almost a hushed whisper.

It may be that the editor will not want to use the article. If so, the hell with it. I would not write an article making fun of science fiction for the sake of appearing in the New York *Times* or anywhere else and for any price. If, on the other hand, she is tricked by some of my light and entertaining touches into publishing the article, I will be delighted, for it will mean that a first-rate outlet will be printing an essay on s.f. that *does* present it in a poignantly heroic light and I will be so proud.

6 October 1961

I feel a little grim today. I called the New York *Times* to see how my article on conventions was doing, and the silly editor said she loved the piece and others were greatly affected by parts of it, but on the whole it was decided that a piece on conventions was too parochial. That only s.f. fans would be interested.

I said, "But you *asked* for an article on conventions. It was your idea, not mine."

She said, "Yes, it was my mistake."

2 November 1965

As for the Science Fiction Writers of America, I think it is important to remember there are two kinds of writers.

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There are the "arrived professionals," who need nothing. There are, however, people less fortunate. Either they are just beginning or else they are (and will remain) marginal writers. Belonging to an organization is not likely to make them better writers or more successful writers; it may not even help them to become shrewder businessmen.

However, it gives them a feeling of belonging. A person who has sold one poor story in the last year has an equal vote with Isaac Asimov. And I think that is just. The situation does not harm me professionally at all (what would I do with two votes?) and bucks up the beginner no end.

1 March 1966

I have always stated that one of the virtues of science fiction is that it can break every taboo without having to be "daring." It is the nature of the medium to break taboos. Now the most taboo of all taboos is mother love. No one must ever say a word against mother love. So I deliberately set out to write a story describing a society in which mother love is disgusting and, therefore, outlawed. The result is my short story "The Deep."

26 September 1966

The people I have met through science fiction — not only the readers but my fellow writers and even my editors — have been uniformly wonderful, warm people. To be a science fiction fan, in whatever fashion, means to be concerned with the future of mankind; even, in a way, to love all men and wish them well in the far-off time when we ourselves have gone our way. I did not know this when I began writing s.f., but nearly 40 years of involvement has taught it to me. I am happy over the choice which, in my innocence, I made so long ago.

5 July 1969

I can't help but think with a certain amazement of the little nine-year-old boy I once was when he fell in love with science fiction. How could he possibly know that the time would come when he would be the biggest single factor in the "respectabilization" of science fiction?

I have probably written more articles on s.f. for "serious" periodicals ranging from the New York *Times* to the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and been referred to more often as an indication of the "real scientists" who are interested in s.f. and write it than all other s.f. personalities put together. In fact, only good old Arthur Clarke rivals me in this.

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11 April 1976

As to being called a science fiction writer...

I am not responsible for how others feel, but I have my own self-respect and standards of integrity.

Science fiction readers made me what I am today, and I do not bite the hand that feeds me. Nor do I ever intend to uproot myself.

I *am* a science fiction writer. I will always *be* a science fiction writer. You can *call* me a science fiction writer because I am not ashamed of being a science fiction writer.

4 June 1971

There was *nothing* wrong with s.f. when I quit. I was at the peak of my powers and at the peak of my earnings. The last story I wrote before quitting was "The Ugly Little Boy," and it is still my favorite. However, as time went on, s.f. became unsatisfactory and my return (which I always planned) was inhibited. New styles and new authors came in, and my writing became old-fogyish. Yet, I had no intention of altering my style.

My particular strength in science fiction is a very simple one. The reader always knows exactly what is happening and why. Even if not all the motivations are at the moment clear, he has every security that they will be made clear. He also knows that my phraseology will be lucid, that everything in the story will be self-consistent and that it will all wind up logically. My weakness is that I have no "style," no "poetry," no "imagery." And I don't consider that a weakness.

21 December 1972

Science fiction can't die as long as the human imagination lives. Fashions may change, but science fiction remains.

Magazines and Columns

Although Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine *will be one of Isaac's legacies, he cherished his relationship with* Fantasy & Science Fiction *magazine. His first letter to editor Anthony Boucher* of F&SF *goes back more than 40 years:*

17 January 1951

Thank you for the kind words for my robot stories, "Mother Earth" and "No Connection." My early days as a writer back in 1939 and 1940 created permanent scars on my soul, and editorial kindness is still mighty soothing.

I have enjoyed *F&SF* tremendously (still do), but must admit that I always thought your editorial bent

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leant strongly towards fantasy and the emotional or "Ray Bradbury" type of science fiction. It is therefore exceedingly good news to me that you consider my sort of stuff favorably.

One year passed.

18 January 1952

I am anxious to write for *Fantasy & Science Fiction* since it is the one major magazine my byline has not yet appeared in.

Still another year passed, and here is a letter that Isaac wrote to Boucher but never sent:

6 February 1953

I wonder whatever happened to my story "Flies," which you bought months and months ago. I keep watching for it every issue. Of course, I know that each issue has to be put together like a jigsaw and that the turn of "Flies" may not have come up, but—call this crazy, if you like—I keep thinking, "Gee, maybe they changed their minds about the yarn and decided it isn't printable after all."

But then Boucher wrote to him that "Flies." would appear in the June 1953 issue. Isaac replied:

27 February 1953

I'm so glad you wrote to me about "Files." I was getting quite dismal about it. For your amusement, I'm sending you the carbon of a letter I wrote you on 6 February (the original of which I tore up, after I had sealed it into a stamped envelope).

In the November 1958 issue of F&SF, *Isaac began writing a series of science columns that was to continue for 399 issues. He enjoyed writing these monthly columns more than anything he ever wrote. Following are letters he wrote to Ed Ferman, who became the* F&SF *editor with the December 1964 issue:*

21 February 1968

It is perfectly understood between us that I write these articles for *F&SF* out of love and not for money and that I would write them just as cheerfully for no fee at all. So for goodness' sake, don't ever feel apologetic about what you pay me.

And if I ever missed an issue, no reader or combination of readers could possibly be gloomier than I—although perhaps I wouldn't be gloomy at all. For it seems to me that as long as *F&SF* exists and doesn't fire me, the only reason I would ever miss would be a fatality (or possibly

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merely a near-fatality) to myself, and I would then be in no position to feel gloom or anything else.

It is my present ambition to reach and pass beyond article #500. In fact, my article #495 (if my calculations are correct) would appear in the January 2000 issue of *F&SF* and wouldn't that be nice.

15 September 1969

Every once in a while, I get letters from high school teachers and even college professors who say they get their students to read some of my *F&SF* articles. It gives me a great kick to get stuff into a science fiction magazine that doesn't ordinarily find its way into the groves of academe itself.

18 January 1971

I am very chagrined. Over the weekend, I planned to do *nothing* because I had just finished a big project on Byron's "Don Juan." So I picked up a math book and started reading it. Within the hour, I got so restless over what I was reading that I got up, sat down and wrote an *F&SF* essay. But that was not the one I had planned to do next. So I wrote the other one, too. Now I have *two* of them.

This means I now have nothing to do till 10 May, if I can bear to wait so long. Well, I will force myself because I keep creeping up farther and farther ahead of deadline until I have to deliberately wait for you to catch up. How about going semi-monthly so I can write two a month? (No extra charge?)

25 December 1976

First issue of my new magazine has just come out. I hope it does well, but even more I hope yours does well. Yours has my essays in it.

21 May 1981

You know, Ed, almost every one of my *F&SF* essays has *something* in it that is completely original with me and that I have never seen used. And no one ever comments on the fact — not the readers, not my fellow scientists, not even my editor.

Sometimes I figure everyone is waiting till I'm dead to say how great I was — so I wouldn't get swelled-headed. And sometimes I think that the mere fact that even after 23 years the readers are not tired of my essays is because they recognize the brilliance and originality even if they don't say so. Well, I, never known for my modesty, say so!

4 January 1986

Do you realize that in two months I will complete my 28th year with *F&SF*? When do I get my gold watch? No! That's on retirement, and I don't intend to retire.

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4 November 1986

The Los Angeles *Times* Syndicate has talked me into writing a weekly syndicated column for them. So that's a new job for me. I wrote my first column last Saturday morning, and I plan to write one first thing every Saturday morning.

I'm telling you this because the news may get to you, and you may wonder if I'll have time to write my *F&SF* essays if the new job gets pressing. Fear not! If anything shows signs of getting in the way of my *F&SF* column, I drop the anything — never the *F&SF* column.

7 May 1988

Sometimes, I'm astonished that I can think up different subjects. It would be nice if I lived long enough to run out of subjects, because then I think I would live forever.

His final Fantasy & Science Fiction *column appeared in the issue of February 1992. Isaac died April 6, 1992.*

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Although we haven't combed all the back issues of F&SF, *we believe this might be the first Chanukah story to be published in our pages. Harlan Ellison originally wrote this story for a series done on National Public Radio last year. Since the story aired in December of 1994, Harlan has made substantive changes to the text.*

Here, for the first time in print, is "Go Toward the Light."

Go Toward the Light

By Harlan Ellison

IT WAS A TIME OF MIRACLES. Time, itself, was the first miracle. That we had learned how to drift backward through it, that we had been able to achieve it at all: another miracle. And the most remarkably miraculous miracle of all: that of the one hundred and sixty-five physicists, linguists, philologists, archaeologists, engineers, technicians, programmers of large-scale numerical simulations, and historians who worked on the Timedrift Project, only two were Jews. Me, myself, Matty Simon, a timedrifter, what is technically referred to on my monthly paycheck as an authentic "chronocircumnavigator" — euphemistically called a "fugitive" by the one hundred and sixty-three Gentile techno-freaks and computer jockeys — short-speak for *Tempus Fugit* — "Time Flies" — broken-backed Latin, just a "fugitive." That's me, young Matty, and the other Jew is Barry Levin. Not Le*vine*, and not Le*veen*, but Levin, as if to rhyme with "let me in." Mr. Barry R. Levin, Fields Medal nominee, post-adolescent genius and wiseguy, the young man who Stephen Hawking says has made the greatest contributions to quantum gravity, the guy who, if you ask him a simple question you get a pageant, endless lectures on chrono-string theory, complexity theory, algebraic number theory, how

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many pepperonis can dance on the point of a pizza. Also, Barry Levin, orthodox Jew. Did I say *orthodox*? Beyond, galactically *beyond* orthodox. So damned orthodox that, by comparison, Moses was a *fresser* of barbequed pork sandwiches with Texas hot links. Levin, who was *frum*, Chassid, a reader and quoter of the Talmud, and also the biggest pain in the...I am a scientist, I am not allowed to use that kind of language. A pain in the nadir, the fundament, the buttocks, the *tuchis!*

A man who drove everyone crazy on Project Timedrift by continuing to insist that while it was all well and good to be going back to record at first hand every aspect of the Greek Culture, that the Hellenic World was enriched and enlightened by the Israelites and so, by rights, we ought to be making book on the parallel history of the Jews.

With one hundred and sixty-three *goyim* on the Project, you can imagine with what admiration and glee this unending assertion was received. Gratefully, we were working out of the University of Chicago, and not Pinsk, so at least I didn't have to worry about pogroms.

What I *did* worry about was Levin's characterization of me as a "pretend Jew."

"You're not a Good Jew," he said to me yesterday. We were lying side by side in the REM sleep room, relaxing after a three-hour hypnosleep session learning the idiomatics of Ptolemaic Egyptian, all ninety-seven dialects. He in his sling, me in mine.

"I *beg* your sanctimonious pardon," I said angrily. "And you, I suppose, are a *Good* Jew, by comparison to my being a *Bad* Jew?"

"Res ipsa loquitur," he replied, not even opening his eyes. It was Latin, and it meant *the thing speaks for itself;* it was self-evident.

"When I was fourteen years old," I said, propping myself on one elbow and looking across at him lying there with his eyes shut, "a kid named Jack Wheeldon, sitting behind me in an assembly at my junior high school, kicked my seat and called me a kike. I turned around and hit him in the head with my geography book. He was on the football team, and he broke my jaw. Don't tell me I'm a Bad Jew. I ate through a straw for three months."

He turned his head and gave me that green-eyed lizard-on-a-rock stare. "This is a Good Jew, eh? Chanukah is in three days. You'll be lighting the candles, am I correct? You'll be reciting the prayers? You'll observe *yontiff* using nothing but virgin olive oil in your *menorah*, to celebrate the miracle?"

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Oh, how I wanted to pop him one. "I gotcher miracle," I said, rudely. I lay back in the sling and closed my eyes.

I didn't believe in miracles. How Yehudah of the Maccabees had fielded a mere ten thousand Jews against Syrian King Antiochus's mercenary army of 60,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry; and how he had whipped them like a tub of butter. How the victors had then marched on Jerusalem and retaken the Second Temple; and how they found that in the three years of Hellenist and Syrian domination and looting the Temple had grown desolate and overgrown with vegetation, the gates burned, and the Altar desecrated. But worst of all, the sacred vessels, including the *menorah* had been stolen. So the priests, the *Kohanim*, took seven iron spits, covered them with wood, and crafted them into a makeshift *menorah*. But where could they find uncontaminated oil required for the lighting of the candelabrum?

It was a time of miracles. They found one flask of oil. A *cruse* of oil, whatever a cruse was. And when they lit it, a miracle transpired, or so I was told in Sunday School, which was a weird name for it because Friday sundown to Saturday sundown is the Sabbath for Jews, except we were Reform, and that meant Saturday afternoon was football and maybe a movie matinee, so I went on Sundays. And, miracle of miracles, I forgot most of those football games, but I remembered what I'd been taught about the "miracle" of the oil, if you believe that sort of mythology they tell to kids. The oil, just barely enough for one day, burned for *eight* days, giving the *Kohanim* sufficient time to prepare and receive fresh uncontaminated oil that was fit for the *menorah*.

A time of miracles. Like, for instance, you're on the Interstate, seventy-five miles from the nearest gas station, and your tank is empty. But you ride the fumes seventy-five miles to a fill-up. Sure. And one day's oil burns for eight. Not in *this* universe, it doesn't.

"I don't believe in old wives' tales that there's a 'miracle' in one day's oil burning for eight," I said.

And *he* said: "That wasn't the miracle."

And *I* said: "Seems pretty miraculous to me. If you believe."

And *he* said: "The miracle was that they knew the oil was uncontaminated. Otherwise they couldn't use it for the ceremony."

"So how did they know?" I asked.

"They found one cruse, buried in the dirt of the looted and defiled Temple

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of the Mount. One cruse that had been sealed with the seal of the high rabbi, the *Kohen Gadol*, the Great Priest."

"Yeah, so what's the big deal? It had the rabbi's seal on it. What did they expect, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval?"

"It was never done. It wasn't required that oil flasks be sealed. And rules were rigid in those days. No exceptions. No variations. Certainly the personal involvement of the *Kohen Gadol* in what was almost an act of housekeeping...well...it was unheard-of. Unthinkable. Not that the High Priest would consider the task beneath him," he rushed to interject, "but it would never fall to his office. It would be considered *unworthy* of his attention."

"Heaven forfend," I said, wishing he'd get to the punchline.

Which he did. "Not only was the flask found, its seal was unbroken, indicating that the contents had not been tampered with. One miraculous cruse, clearly marked for use in defiance of all logic, tradition, random chance. And *that* was the miracle."

I chuckled. "Mystery, maybe. Miracle? I don't think so."

"Naturally you don't think so. You're a Bad Jew."

And *that*, because he was an arrogant little creep, because *his* subjective world-view was the *only* world-view, because he fried my frijoles, ranked me, dissed me, ground my gears, and in general cheesed me off ... I decided to go "fugitive" and solve his damned mystery, just to slap him in his snotty face with a dead fish! When they ask you why any great and momentous event in history took place, tell 'em that all the theories are stuffed full of wild blueberry muffins. Tell 'em the only reason that makes *any* sense is this: *it seemed like a good idea at the time.*

Launch the Spanish Armada? Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Invent the wheel? Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Drift back in time to 165 Before the Christian Era and find out how one day's oil burns for eight? Seemed like a good idea at the time. Because Barry R. Levin was a smartass!

IT WAS ALL CONTAINED in the suit of lights. All of time, and the ability to drift backward, all of it built into the refined mechanism the academics called a *driftsuit*, but which we "fugitives" called our suit of lights. Like a toreador's elegant costume, it was a glittering, gleaming, shining

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second-skin. All the circuits were built in, printed deep in the ceramic metal garment. It was a specially-developed cermet, *pliable* ceramic metal, not like the armor worn by our astronauts mining the Asteroid Belt. Silver and reflective, crosstar flares at a million points of arm and torso and hooded skull.

We had learned, in this time of miracles, that matter and energy are interchangeable; and that a person can be broken down into energy waves; and those waves can be fired off into the timestream, toward the light. Time did, indeed, sweep backward, and one could drift backward, going ever toward that ultimate light that we feared to enter. Not because of superstition, but because we all understood on a level we could not explain, that the light was the start of it all, perhaps the Big Bang itself.

But we *could* go fugitive, drift back and back, even to the dawn of life on this planet. And we could return, but only to the moment we had left. We could not go forward, which was just as well. Literally, the information that was us could be fired out backward through the timestream as wave data.

And the miracle was that it was all contained in the suit of lights. Calibrate it on the wrist-cuff, thumb the "activate" readout that was coded to the DNA of only the three of us who were timedrifters, and no matter where we stood, we turned to smoke, turned to light, imploded into a scintillant point, and vanished, to be fired away, and to reassemble as ourselves at the shore of the Sea of Reeds as the Egyptians were drowned, in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of Jesus's betrayal, in the crowd as Chicago's Mayor Cermak was assassinated by a demented immigrant trying to get a shot at Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the right field bleachers as the Mets won the World Series.

I thumbed the readout and saw only light, nothing but light, golden as a dream, eternal as a last breath, and I hurtled back toward the light that was *greater* than this light that filled me...

...and in a moment I stood in the year 165 Before the Christian Era, within the burned gates of the Second Temple, on the Mount in Jerusalem. It was the 24th day of the Hebrew month Kislev. 165 BCE. The slaughtered dead of the Greco-Syrian army of Antiochus lay ten deep outside. The swordsmen of the *Yovan*, who had stabled pigs in the *Beis Ha Mikdosh*, even in the holiest of holies, who had defiled the sanctuary which housed the *menorah*, who had had sex on the stones of the sacred altar, and profaned

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those stones with urine and swine...they lay with new, crimson mouths opened in their necks, with iron protruding from their bellies and backs.

Ex-college boy from Chicago, timedrifter, fugitive. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. I never dreamed this kind of death could be...with bodies that had not been decently straightened for display in small boxes...with hands that reached for the bodies that had once worn them. Faces without eyes.

I stood in the rubble of the most legendary structure in the history of my people, and realized this had not been, in any way, a good idea. Sick to my stomach, I started to thumb my wrist-cuff, to return *now* to the Project labs.

And I heard the scream.

And I turned my head.

And I saw the *Kohane*, who had been sent on ahead to assess the desecration — a son of Mattisyahu — I saw him flung backward and pinned to the floor of dirt and pig excrement, impaled by the spear of a Syrian pikeman who had been hiding in the shadows. Deserter of the citadel's garrison, a coward hiding in the shadows. And as he strode forward to finish the death of the writhing priest, I charged, grabbed up one of the desecrated stones of the altar and, as he turned to stare at me, frozen in an instant at the sight of this creature of light bearing down on him...I raised the jagged rock and crushed his face to pulp.

Dying, the *Kohane* looked upon me with wonder. He murmured prayers and my suit of lights shone in his eyes. I spoke to him in Greek, but he could not understand me. And then in Latin, both formal and vulgate, but his whispered responses were incomprehensible to me. *I could not speak his language!*

I tried Parthian, Samarian, Median, Cuthian, even Chaldean and Sumerian...but he faded slowly, only staring up at me in dying wonder. Then I understood one word of his lamentation, and I summoned up the hypnosleep learning that applied. I spoke to him in Aramaic of the Hasmonean brotherhood. And I begged him to tell me where the flasks of oil were kept.

But there were none. He had brought nothing with him, in advance of his priest brothers and the return of Shimon from his battle with the citadel garrison.

It was a time of miracles, and I knew what to do.

I thumbed the readout on my wrist-cuff and watched as my light became a mere pinpoint in his dying eyes.

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* * *

I went back to Chicago. This was wrong, I knew this was wrong: timedrifters are forbidden to alter the past. The three of us who were trained to go fugitive, we understood above all else...*change nothing, alter nothing,* or risk a tainted future. I knew what I was doing was wrong.

But, oh, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

I went to Rosenbloom's, still in business on Devon Avenue, still in Rogers Park, even this well into the 21st century. I had to buy some trustworthy oil.

I told the little balding clerk I wanted virgin olive oil so pure it could be used in the holiest of ceremonies. He said, "How holy does it have to be for Chanukah in Chicago?" I told him it was going to be used in Israel. He laughed. "All oil today is 'tomei'—you know what that is?" I said no, I didn't. (Because, you see, I *didn't* say, I'm not a Good Jew, and I don't know such things.) He said, "It means impure. And you know what *virgin* means? It means every olive was squeezed, but only the first drop was used." I asked him if the oil he sold was acceptable. He said, "Absolutely." I knew how much I needed, I'd read the piece on Chanukah history. Half a log, the Talmud had said. Two *riv-ee-eas*. I had to look it up: about eight ounces, the equivalent of a pony bottle of Budweiser. He sold it to me in a bottle of dark brown, opaque glass.

And I took the oil to one of the one hundred and sixty-three Gentiles on Project Timedrift, a chemist named Bethany Sherward, and I asked her to perform a small miracle. She said, "Matty, this is hardly a miracle you're asking for. You know the alleged 'burning bush' that spoke to Moses? They still exist. Burning bushes. In the Sinai, Saudi Arabia, Iraq. Mostly over the oil fields. They just burn and burn and..."

While she did what she had to do, I went fugitive and found myself, a creature of light once again, in the *Beis Ha Mikdosh*, in the fragile hours after midnight, in the Hebrew month of Cheshvan, in the year 125 BCE; and I stole a cruse of oil and took it back to Chicago and poured it into a sink, and realized what an idiot I'd been. I needn't have gone to Rosenbloom's. I could have used *this* oil, which was pure. But it was too late now. There was a lot we all had to learn about traveling in time.

I got the altered oil from Bethany Sherward, and when I hefted the small container I almost felt as if I could detect a heaviness that had not been there before. This oil was denser than ordinary olive oil, virgin or otherwise.

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I poured the new oil into the cruse. It sloshed at the bottom of the vessel. This was a dark red, rough-surfaced clay jar, tapering almost into the shape of the traditional Roman amphora, but it had a narrow base, and a fitted lid without a stopper. It now contained enough oil for exactly one day, half a log. I returned to the Timedrift lab, put on the suit of lights — it was wonderful to have one of only three triple-A clearances — and set myself to return to the Temple of the Mount, five minutes earlier than I'd appeared the first time. I didn't know if I'd see myself coalesce into existence five minutes later, but I *did* know that I could save the *Kohane*'s life.

I went toward the light, I became a creature of the light yet again, and found myself standing inside the gates once more. I started inside the Great Temple...

And heard the scream.

Time had adjusted itself. He was falling backward, the spear having ripped open his chest. I charged the Syrian, hit him with the cruse of oil, knocked him to the dirt, and crushed his windpipe with one full force stomp of my booted foot.

I stood staring down at him for perhaps a minute. I had killed a man. With hardly the effort I would have expended to wipe sweat from my face, I had smashed the life out of him. I started to shake, and then I heard myself whimper. And then I made a stop to it. I had come here to do a thing, and I knew it would now be done because...nowhere in sight did *another* creature of shimmering light appear. We had much to learn about traveling in time.

I went to the priest where he lay in his dirt-caked blood, and I raised his head. He stared at me in wonder, as he had the first time.

"Who are you?" he asked, coughing blood.

"Matty Simon," I said. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

He smiled. "Mattisyahu's son, Shimon?"

I started to say no, Matty, not Mattisyahu; Simon, not Shimon. But I didn't say that. I had thought *he* was one of the sons, but I was wrong. Had I been a more knowledgeable Jew, I would have known: he wasn't the *Kohane Gadol*. He was a Levite, from Moses's tribe; one of the priestly class; sent ahead as point man for the redemption of the Temple; like Seabees sent in ahead of an invasion to clear out trees and clean up the area. But now he would die, and not do the job.

"Put your seal on this cruse," I said. "Did the *Kohane Gadol* give you that authority, can you do that?"

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He looked at the clay vessel, and even in his overwhelming pain he was frightened and repelled by the command I had made. "No...I cannot..."

I held him by the shoulders with as much force as I could muster, and I looked into his eyes and I found a voice I'd never known was in me, and I demanded, *"Can you do this?"*

He nodded slightly, in terror and awe, and he hesitated a moment and then asked, "Who are you? Are you a Messenger of God?" I was all light, brighter than the sun, and holding him in my arms.

"Yes," I lied. "Yes, I am a Messenger of God. Let me help you seal the flask."

That he did. He did what was forbidden, what was not possible, what he should not have done. He put the seal of pure oil on the vessel containing half a log, two *riv-ee-eas*, of long-chain hydrocarbon oil from a place that did not even exist yet in the world, oil from a time unborn, from the future. The longer the chain, the greater the binding energy. The greater the binding energy, the longer it would burn. One day's oil, from the future; one day's oil that would burn brightly for eight days.

He died in my arms, smiling up into the face of God's Messenger. He went toward the light, a prayer on his lips.

Today, at lunch in the Commissary, Barry R. Levin slapped his tray down on the table across from me, slid into the seat, and said, "Well, Mr. Pretend Jew, tomorrow is Chanukah. Are you ready to light the candles?"

"Beat it, Levin."

"Would you like me to render the prayers phonetically for you?"

"Get away from me, Levin, or I'll lay you out. I'm in no mood for your scab-picking today."

"Hard night, Mr. Simon?"

"You'll never know." I gave him the look that said *get in the wind, you pain in the ass.* He stood up, lifted his tray, took a step, then turned back to me.

"You're a Bad Jew, remember that."

I shook my head ruefully and couldn't hold back the mean little laugh. "Yeah, right. I'm a Bad Jew. I'm also the Messenger of God."

He just looked at me. Not a clue why I'd said that. All scores evened, I didn't have the heart to tell him...

It just seemed like a helluva good idea at the time. The time of miracles.

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A year ago, Michael Coney's delightful story, "Tea and Hamsters," provided the inspiration for Gary Lippincott's cover on our January issue. The team has returned again, this time illustrating an adventure-filled game-related tale. In "Bulldog Drummond and the Grim Reaper," Michael Coney has written a rollicking story of pulse-pounding terror, with some humor and hijinks thrown into the mix. Gary Lippincott's cover captures both the adventure and the humor, and gives our holiday issue a festive feel all at the same time.

Bulldog Drummond and the Grim Reaper

By Michael Coney

BOBBIE AXFORD AND THE raccoon eyed each other, separated by the thickness of her office window.

There was an uncanny glint in the raccoon's eyes.

It was a cunning glint, a knowing glint, a glint that stripped her naked. It was the kind of glint she used to see in the eyes of her ex-partner, ex-lover Bill, the treacherous rat.

"Get the hell off that ledge!" she shouted. She smacked at the glass with a rolled-up paper. The animal stood its ground, sure-footed, hairy, blackish-gray, hump-backed. The office was six floors up. In the old days she'd have been able to open the window, and with one quick shove the disgusting brute would have been history. But city windows didn't open nowadays.

Odd that the raccoon should have climbed up all this way. Curiosity? Death wish? The ceaseless quest for sexual fulfillment? Well, he wouldn't find much of the latter up here. The huge Axford Proximation Building contained many unusual things, but nothing resembling a female raccoon.

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Funny that she should assume the thing was male. It was the eyes that did it. That lecherous gleam.

Enough of speculation. Time was of the essence, with the Harrods Christmas promotion coming up. Axford Proximation had rented a lot of space and she needed to develop a new and exciting proximation quest to wow the consumers. Casting a final suspicious glance at the raccoon, she returned to the business of guiding Ted through the Drummond scenario.

The robot was the latest in a long line of Teds. His predecessors had all met their doom in the giant construct that occupied most of the Axford Proximation building, which in turn sprawled over ten city blocks. Bobbie's staff primed the construct with perils, aids to survival and prizes, the computer set the parameters for the quest, and she led Ted through the construct's multiplicity of alternate pathways, checking out the quest's viability and recording the results on the master. The construct was known to the staff as the Grim Reaper. Death lurked around every corner.

At this moment the monitor showed Ted, currently playing the role of Captain Hugh "Bulldog" Drummond, standing in a tiny chamber. His rechargeable flashlight was playing over bright and featureless metallic walls, ceiling and floor. There was no obvious way out, but then there never was. It looked as though Carl Peterson, diabolical mastermind, had beaten him at last.

Ted, who was nothing if not sophisticated, felt a flicker of fear.

Bobbie checked that the fear had been successfully recorded onto the master. Vicarious emotion was a recent achievement in proximation, and was going to be a big selling feature at Harrods.

Next, she considered Ted's alternatives. The tiny oxygen vial could be useful; the chamber might shortly be filled with gas, water or whatever. Forget the plastic explosive; certainly it would blow a hole in those walls, but it would do the same to Ted.

She had to come to a decision soon, otherwise Ted would do it himself. And Ted, though sophisticated, did not always decide right.

And that reminded her of Bill Kilpatrick, who could never come to a decision about anything, except for the day he walked out on her and Axford Proximation. Bill was a vacillating ninny and she was better off without him.

Somewhere beyond the chamber walls came a muffled whir, and a terrified screaming from Ted recalled her to the task. She'd have to edit that

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out; Drummond would never have screamed in that cowardly manner. The robot's flashlight showed that the chamber was getting smaller. The walls were closing in, slowly but relentlessly. Neat idea. Now, what would a man like Drummond do in such a situation? She took a mental inventory of available aids to survival. Meanwhile Ted had drawn his laser pistol, a bad mistake. His first shot criss-crossed the chamber with deadly reflections, finally striking Ted himself, fortunately at much reduced power.

"You all right, Bobbie?" It was Rupert, her personal assistant, smoothing down his hair. Rupert was a good-looking bastard and knew it. He'd actually used a hologram of himself as a prize for a female quest. It had sold depressingly well. "I thought I heard someone screaming," said Rupert.

"That was Ted. He's in a jam. He's a good screamer."

"Did you know there's a raccoon outside the window?"

She turned to consider the creature thoughtfully, all business. "Think we can use him? Are raccoons, uh, *deadly* in any way?"

"They can carry rabies, I believe."

"Have we used rabies?"

"We have rabid bats and rabid dogs in the Reaper. Raccoons, I don't think so. I'll check it out." He stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders and sliding downward.

"Stop that," murmured Bobbie. "The raccoon will see."

"The hell with the raccoon."

"No, listen, I feel uncomfortable. There's something...human about the way that animal looks. It reminds me of Bill. Do me a favor, Rupert. Have one of the staff shoot it off, will you?"

"I'll shoot it off myself. Who needs it, huh? As if the pigeons aren't enough." Rupert sensed rejection and his tone had turned sullen. "How is Bill, by the way?" he asked pointedly.

"I haven't seen that weird guy in months and I don't want to." Bobbie swung round in her chair. "Why do you ask?" She eyed him closely. There was something about Rupert she didn't quite trust. Were his eyes actually shifty or did they simply dart about alertly, the way a good personal assistant's should?

"I happened to run into his manager Slim Ferris yesterday. Business at Mindset Visions is brisk, he told me. They've rented space at Harrods too. Ironic, isn't it?" Rupert's eyes shifted, or darted.

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"What's ironic?"

"You and Bill, I mean. You used to be partners here, now you're running rival businesses."

"We're *not* rivals." Angrily, Bobbie swung back to face the screen. What in God's name was Ted doing with that spray can in there? "Mindset Visions is in an entirely different line of business."

"Yet their sales go up as ours go down."

"Lots of things go up as our sales go down." But she was worried. Was proximation going out of style? Were people tiring of armchair adventures?

"Tastes change," said Rupert, echoing her thoughts. "People change, too. Remember 'Calves' Stilton?"

Bobbie remembered all too well. H.K. "Calves" Stilton was a legend at Axford Proximation. A man of mighty physique, he'd been their most inventive programmer until, working on a difficult detail of the Drummond quest, he'd gone berserk. "The hell with all this pretense," he'd reportedly shouted, "life's too short!" And he'd shattered the screen of his monitor with one kick of his oaken legs, hauled open the steel door normally used only by Ted, and stridden into the Grim Reaper personally.

They'd followed his progress on the monitors for a while, as he overcame peril after peril with muscular expertise and lightning reactions, until they lost him in a new scenario where eyespies had not yet been installed. When Bobbie left the office that evening, "Calves" was still in there, presumably battling Carl Peterson, the diabolical mastermind.

The story was taken up by Bill Kilpatrick, working late. Apparently "Calves" had emerged triumphant from the Reaper in the small hours, handed in his notice and gone home carrying his prize, a holographic reproduction of Miss Nude Earth 2024. It was later reported that he'd gone through a form of marriage with her; subsequently the couple had emigrated to Altair IV where they'd lived happily ever since.

Such was the legend of H.K. "Calves" Stilton, the only human ever to have walked the deadly corridors of the Grim Reaper.

"'Calves' was crazy," said Bobbie. "He must have been crazy from the start but we didn't spot it. Programmers are odd people. 'Calves' cost us two years' work on the Drummond quest. You'd think he'd have given us all the details of the program before he took off for Altair IV in that irresponsible manner. It's his fault we're having to run Ted through the quest." She sighed.

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"My God, I wish everyone was like Ted. I know where I am with Ted. He's simple, and he's rational."

"If that's the case," Rupert pointed out nastily, "why is he spraying the walls of that chamber with shark repellent?"

When Bobbie Axford described Bill Kilpatrick as weird, she was thinking of his disdain for material success and the wealth that came with it. Wealth, in Bill's books, stank. He blamed it for the break-up with Bobbie. To a certain extent he was right; but he didn't realize another factor was Bobbie's pride. She'd founded Axford Proximation and it had prospered hugely, then he'd come along and tried to get her to change direction. And the subsequent success of Mindset Visions suggested that he'd been right.

At the moment when Ted's metallic finger was squeezing the button on the can of shark repellent, Bill was sitting in the sordid living room of his tumble-down cottage at Foss Creek, a village with few amenities some thirty kilometers from the city, populated by dropouts and idealists.

It says much for Bill's strength of character that he'd maintained his squalid lifestyle despite the huge success of Mindset Visions, the business he'd started after leaving Axford Proximation two years ago. Bill was no fool. He'd taken the precaution of hiring Slim Ferris as General Manager and giving him a free hand. Slim's curriculum vitae included ten years for embezzlement of charity funds. Bill was confident that he, Slim, would ensure that he, Bill, could continue to live in the manner to which he was accustomed.

And now Bill, in his slovenly living room, was wearing the patented headset that represented one-half of his great invention.

The other half was implanted in the brain of his raccoon, McArthur.

Through the eyes of McArthur, Bill watched Bobbie sitting at her monitor. He watched the entry of Rupert the secretary, saw him pawing Bobbie, and his blood boiled. He couldn't hear what they were saying; the window was too thick. Then he saw Rupert stride purposefully from the room, and shortly afterward McArthur's instincts for self-preservation overrode Bill's power of suggestion. A section of ledge beside McArthur's right paw exploded and the raccoon bolted. Whirling impressions of white concrete and blue downspouts bypassed Bill's optic nerve and registered directly on the visual center of his brain. Fear caused his heart to race: like proximation, the mindsets supplied vicarious emotion. Finally the images steadied up,

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showing dark and ancient brickwork, damp grass and dead leaves. McArthur had gone to ground. The images faded. His faithful companion was unconscious, maybe dead.

Bill tried to come to a decision, always a difficult task. Should he ride boldly to McArthur's rescue, and risk a confrontation with Bobbie? Or should he sit tight and keep quiet? No, he couldn't let McArthur rot. He and the raccoon had been through many adventures together. At least he should recover the body and give it a decent burial.

But when he arrived at the Axford Proximation he found it was not going to be so simple. Several police stood beside their vehicles, scanning the bushes with infra-red detectors. His heart leaped at the sight of Bobbie, looking beautiful, chatting to the officer in charge.

"What's going on?" he asked.

She favored him with the kind of glance he'd seen her use on McArthur. "Some busybody reported seeing laser fire."

"It is an offense to discharge a firearm within the city dome," explained the officer sententiously.

"I told you," replied Bobbie patiently, "it was probably a reflection from inside the building. We use all kinds of weapons in there. Anything my staff can dream up, we use it. We can simulate a nuclear holocaust if we want to. Your witness may have seen one. We have the necessary permits, if that's what you're worried about."

In the end the police departed, muttering, and Bobbie swung round on Bill. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I just came to pick up McArthur."

"Who the hell is McArthur?"

Bobbie was looking suspicious. Circumstantial evidence was required. "Just an ordinary guy, Winston McArthur, about one-eighty pounds. Salt of the earth. Lost a leg in a boating accident, poor fellow. Insurance wouldn't pay up for a replacement, would you believe it?"

"You're lying," said Bobbie coldly. "I don't know why, but you're lying. I can always tell. Now get the hell off my property before I call those cops back."

Bill watched her trot back into the building, all long legs and angry buttocks, and after a decent interval began to search the bushes. He soon located McArthur lying under a juniper. The raccoon was unconscious, but

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Bill could detect a heartbeat. "Poor old guy, you'll be okay now," he murmured, gathering McArthur up and carrying him to the car.

As he drove back to Foss Creek, Bill pondered on Bobbie's continuing hostility. Did she dislike him personally, as she might dislike a hairy spider in her shower, or was it a generalized dislike of what he stood for? If the former, there was little hope of a reconciliation. If the latter, he could try standing for something else.

So what did he stand for right now? That was easy enough. He stood for Mindset Visions, business rival of Axford Proximation. He'd tried to sell the idea of the mindset to Bobbie when they'd been partners, and she'd refused. So after the bust-up, the angry words and the threats of legal action, he'd started up on his own. And the mindset had proved a winner. People had enjoyed experiencing the real-life adventures of their pets and the thing had grown from there, with charter companies implanting lions so that their clients could follow the hunt and experience the kill and the feasting. That aspect was, Bill felt, all rather disgusting. He preferred the innocent prowlings of his raccoon although, even then, there had been that brutal episode when McArthur had raided the chicken coop. Nature was rough and raw and vivid, but that was what people liked, apparently.

He sighed. With the Harrods Christmas event coming up, the rift between him and Bobbie could only get worse.

WAS SHE losing her grip? On replaying the master, Bobbie found she'd included shark repellent as an aid to survival, instead of a small but serviceable Diamondite multiple-use club. She restarted the Drummond quest in the shrinking chamber to put matters right. The unexpected meeting with Bill had addled her thinking.

"Funny thing," said Rupert, standing at the window. "Your ex-partner's driving off with that raccoon. Why would anyone want a dead raccoon?"

She joined him in time to see Bill's ancient vehicle swaying off down the street. "I told you, he's weird...Wait a minute." Surely not! "Do you know what I think? That raccoon was Bill's tool! He implanted it with one of his goddamned devices and sent it to spy on us!"

"Why would he do that? He knows all our processes already."

"I'll tell you why. It's so he can release the solution to the Drummond quest to the media at the Christmas event! We wouldn't sell a single disk if he did that!"

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"My God. Maybe it's as well Ted was screwing up in there."

Stung, she retorted, "Screwing up? You leave the solutions to me, Rupert, and stick to what you do best. I've been concerned that the quests are becoming stereotyped so I programmed Ted to introduce a random element. You see the results."

It was not Bobbie's day. There came a rumbling from behind the office walls. A hatch jerked open and a large cube of crushed metal thudded to the floor.

Bobbie knelt beside it. "Is that you, Ted? Oh, Jesus Christ!" She felt tears in her eyes. She'd guided Ted successfully through more adventures than any of his predecessors; the dangers they'd shared together had, she felt, resulted in a bond between them. And now this. Through her inattention she'd allowed him to be bested by Carl Peterson the diabolical mastermind, and compressed to a fraction of his former self. "I'm sorry, Ted," she whispered brokenly.

"So what happens now?" said Rupert.

"I...I suppose we'll have to send in another Ted."

"There are no more Teds."

"What are you talking about?"

"That was the last. I warned you about this a week ago, Bobbie. Western Robotics have cut us off until we pay their account in full."

She stared at him. "Cut us off? What are we going to do? How are we going to finish the Drummond quest? What about the Christmas promotion?"

He hesitated. "There's one possibility. We could appeal to Bill Kilpatrick. Maybe we could use a mindset and send an expendable raccoon through the course. Or better still, a chimp."

"No way! I wouldn't appeal to Bill Kilpatrick if he was the last man in the Universe. Anyway, you can't command animals through a mindset. You can only influence them. In the end they'll obey their own instincts for self-preservation, and the Drummond quest is no place for quitters. I always said there was a weak link in Bill's goddamned mindset, and this proves it!"

"Do you have a better idea?"

She gazed at him steadily. "Rupert, in the past you've professed to love me. Maybe I've been cautious, maybe even cynical. A woman has a right to be cynical after an experience like Bill Kilpatrick. But maybe I've been unjust."

"What exactly are you getting at?" he asked warily.

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"This is your chance to prove yourself, Rupert." She took hold of his arm persuasively. "If you truly love me, you'll do this for me."

"Do what?" Mounting alarm showed on his face.

"You'll deputize for Ted."

"Deputize for Ted? Forget it!"

"I'll be with you all the way, Rupert. I'll be sitting here at the monitor, suggesting alternatives, guiding you through. We'll do it together, Rupert. Partners in the Drummond quest. A melding of souls, battling adversity!"

"You seriously want me to step into the Grim Reaper? You must be mad!"

She released his arm. "So you won't do this thing for me?" she said quietly. "So you think I'm mad, do you? Well, Rupert, I'll show you just how mad I am. If you won't deputize for Ted, I'll do it myself!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Bobbie."

"So I'm ridiculous now, am I? Because I want to save Axford Proximation when you won't lift a finger to help? Well, don't you worry yourself about me, Rupert." Her voice rose to a ringing shout. "If 'Calves' Stilton can get through the Reaper and live to tell the tale, then so can I!"

Next morning the rain fell steadily. Bill Kilpatrick sat in his living room, watching the water dripping from his ceiling into a strategically placed bucket. McArthur lay in his basket nearby, shivering, still suffering the effects of the previous day.

Bill was wondering, not for the first time, what life was all about. It was fine to rid oneself of materialistic trappings and ambitions, but that shouldn't lead to such abject boredom, surely? What did he think he was achieving, sitting here like this? Didn't he have something better to do? Should he take up a hobby, maybe search the foreshore for a suitable piece of driftwood and paint it to look like a brontosaurus? That's what most of the residents of Foss Creek did. They seemed happy enough doing it, too.

He was on the point of heaving himself out of his chair when the door burst open and Slim Ferris hurried in, rainwater cascading from his clothing. Bill was struck, as ever, by Slim's resemblance to the forest mandrill. The close-set eyes, the long red nose, the pronounced brow ridge and pointy head; they were all there. He couldn't have entrusted the fortunes of Mindset Visions to a more suitable man.

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"Jesus, what a pigsty." Slim slipped out of his raincoat and shook water over the threadbare carpet. "I'll never understand why you choose to live like this, Bill. What are you trying to prove, for Chrissake?"

"This is my home," said Bill simply. "I like it this way."

"You should get a grip on yourself. Buy yourself a suit, get yourself a woman. Take an interest in the business."

"Take an interest in the business?" Bill was surprised.

"Well, not too great an interest. You know me, I like a free hand. But drop by the factory from time to time. Show the flag to the workers." Slim chuckled. "Some of them are beginning to think I own the whole shebang myself, can you believe it?"

Reassuring words. "So how are things going? Are we keeping our heads above water?"

"Things are going just great, Bill." The tiny eyes gleamed with enthusiasm. "We have all the headsets stockpiled for the Christmas bash and the veterinarians are implanting the recipient animals right now."

"Most people will want to have their own pets implanted, won't they?"

"Sure, sure. But cats and dogs can be boring, know what I mean? We've got a nice line in hyenas, hammerheads, cobras. I have a great idea for our next venture."

"Do we need another venture?"

"Diversity, Bill, diversity is what oils the machinery of commerce. You know what we need? A game farm. Wild animals in their natural habitat, near as we can make it. Goes over big with the preservationist kooks. Wildebeest, zebra, gazelle, all that stuff. Lodges overlooking waterholes. The herds coming to drink in the evenings."

"And the lions moving in for the kill?"

"As they did in Africa, Bill, as they did in Africa. Culling of the weak. Strengthening of the herd. We run it nature's way."

"Except that our lions would be implanted with mindsets."

"Well, yes." A shrewd look disfigured Slim's face. He sat down in the chair opposite Bill, leaning forward confidentially. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, "Sure, people enjoy the kill, why not? But there's a twist I'm discovering. A proportion of our customers — say twenty-five, thirty percent — a significant number, marketwise, *want to be wildebeest.* Or zebra, or gazelle. Get it? They want to be *prey.*" Slim leaned back, smiling proudly in

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the way of a mandrill who has imparted valuable information to the dominant male. "Takes all sorts, doesn't it? It means a sizable reduction in the projected cost of maintaining the herd."

"Listen, Slim, you haven't been promoting cockfighting again, have you? I told you I wouldn't stand for that."

The manager of Mindset Visions looked hurt. "We make the mindsets, we implant a few, we sell the rest. We don't implant fowl of any kind. Their heads are marginally too small, for one thing."

"I heard rumors, that's all."

"Speaking of rumors, have I got news for you!" A look of predatory glee spread over Slim's face. He possessed a wealth of facial expressions, few of them acceptable in human society. "My spies tell me Axford Proximation is in a financial bind! Looks like they won't have their new product ready for the Christmas promotion! We're going to clean up at Harrods!"

Bill felt no answering joy. "Financial bind?"

"Western Robotics have cut them off. Bobbie Axford's run out of Teds for trial runs on the Drummond quest; you remember, 'Calves' Stilton's baby?"

Bill stiffened. "The Drummond quest?"

"Yeah, so guess what! The Axford woman is going into the Reaper herself this morning! I mean, actually following the routes, checking out the alternatives and trying to find the solution. Apparently 'Calves' Stilton went off without a word. How dumb can you get? She's history, Bill. History!" He hesitated in an unusual moment of self-examination, sensing a certain tactlessness. "Of course, I know you and her had a few tumbles in the hay once, but all that's water under the bridge now, I guess, huh?"

But Bill was on his feet, shrugging on an ancient raincoat, hauling McArthur from his basket. "Come on, Slim! There's no time to lose. We have to get Bobbie out of the Reaper! She doesn't know the whole story. It's certain death in there! The Drummond quest killed 'Calves' Stilton!"

"But I thought he married — "

"No, he didn't! It's all a myth! 'Calves' never made it! I invented the whole story myself!"

"Goddamn." As Bill's ancient car bucketed along the narrow lane out of Foss Creek, Slim was unusually silent. Somewhere in a forgotten corner of his black soul there had once glimmered a tiny flame of romance, sustained by the image of "Calves" Stilton and the hologram of Miss Nude Earth living happily ever after.

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Now the flame was dead, and Slim was the poorer for it. "Goddamn," he said again, unable to account for his curious feeling of depression.

Bobbie Axford, dressed in black leotards and accompanied by Drummond's faithful mastiff Uppercut, stood in an octagonal room. There was an identical door set into each side, each with its brass knob. Which knob would "Bulldog" Drummond have turned?

The answer was simple. Drummond stood over six foot tall and was broad in proportion. He was huge, powerful, and direct. He was an expert boxer, marksman and so on. He hit first and asked questions afterwards. He was pretty well invincible. He wouldn't have pussyfooted around turning doorknobs.

Drawing her small but deadly automatic, she took a short run, leaped and smashed open the nearest door with both feet. As it hit the wall behind her she rolled into a crouch, automatic at the ready. The room was unfurnished apart from a single chair. In the chair sat a man, bound and gagged, blood seeping from a terrible wound covering the whole of one side of his face.

The room reverberated to a heavy thud and a yelp from Uppercut, instantly cut off. She spun round. A huge block of concrete stood where the dog had been. It had dropped out of the ceiling and would have reduced her to two dimensions if she'd hesitated on the threshold.

She ran to the injured man and ripped the gag from his mouth.

"Who are you?" she cried.

"Professor Masterson," was the faint reply.

"Who did this to you?"

"Peterson," the man whispered. "Carl Peterson, may his soul rot in hell. He's the devil incarnate. He aims to take over the world. He tortured Sanderson, but Sanderson wouldn't talk, so he killed him with a garden spray a few minutes ago."

For the first time, Bobbie noticed the naked body of a man sprawled on the floor behind the chair. His skin was covered with angry red blisters. She knelt beside him. The body had an odd, sickly-sweet smell.

"Don't touch him!" screamed Masterson. "It's death!"

"You'd better tell me what happened."

He was weeping tears of weakness. "It started months ago. I couldn't help it. I've never been a brave man. I tried to hold out...But in the end I gave him the formula. I — "

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"The formula?" she asked keenly.

"I developed it myself, and I curse the day I did, but at the time I thought it might come in useful. A deadly poison similar to that used by certain Amazon tribes on their blow-darts, blended with a highly corrosive liquid. One drop of this substance on the skin will kill almost instantly. I happened to mention it at a dinner party one evening, and Peterson was interested. Oh, yes, he was very interested, was that devil Peterson."

"I imagine he would be. It's his style."

"Since then, he's been mass-producing it..." The voice was becoming fainter. "And now he's talking about a trial run."

There was no time to lose. "Which way did he go?"

"He went upstairs, or was it downstairs?" For an instant, the eyes held a gleam of cunning. "Which was it? I..." His eyes rolled up. His head lolled. He was dead.

There was a door in the far wall. Bobbie kicked it open and rolled through. This time, the Drummond method met with scant success. There were two flights of stone steps immediately beyond the door; one leading up, the other down. With no chance to consider alternatives, Bobbie tumbled downward into darkness. A door slammed shut behind her.

Picking herself up shakily, she took out her rechargeable flashlight and examined her surroundings. She was in a small, featureless, windowless room. The place had a curious smell that she recognized instantly. It was not the sickly-sweet smell of the body upstairs. It was the sharp, metallic smell of shark repellent.

Her route had converged with the route of the late Ted.

At least she knew what to expect next. She took out her small but serviceable Diamondite multiple-use club. The whirring noise started up. The walls began to close in. She extended the club to its maximum length, slightly greater than the span of her shoulders.

Ted had finished up as a cube. What did this tell her? Two opposite walls must converge to a pre-determined point and stop. Then narrow sections would emerge from the other two walls like plungers, reducing her space to a tall box. Then a square section of the ceiling would descend, and her space would become a Ted-sized cube, and she would be crushed. Bobbie had often boasted to the media that there were very few fake effects in the Grim Reaper. This was real. For an instant she knew fear.

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She shook it off. There would be time for fear later on. Right now, she knew the answer. As the walls approached she positioned the club carefully at right angles. The walls met the ends of the indestructible club, the whirring deepened. She heard a sharp splintering sound. A crack developed in one wall, spreading rapidly. With a crash, a jagged section fell away. She stepped through into a large, well-lit room.

Huge rams stood against the walls, rods extended. In one corner was a heavy, humming compressor. It seemed a lot of expensive equipment for the sole purpose of reducing a robot to a cube. No wonder Axford Proximation was in financial difficulties. She'd have a serious talk with Rupert when she got out.

Rupert. Was he recording her adventures the way she'd taught him yesterday afternoon, or was he goofing off? She looked around for an eyespy lens, and spotted one at the top corner of the room.

"You'd better not be missing any of this stuff, Rupert!" she shouted, hauling open a door and running up a flight of stairs.

She paused at the top, in another octagonal chamber where Uppercut was waiting for her, having apparently dodged the concrete block after all. You couldn't make assumptions in the Drummond quest. She listened carefully at each door, and from behind the fifth she heard a soft coughing. Kicking the door open she found herself in a luxuriously appointed bedroom. An old woman lay in bed, frail, skin like parchment, clearly at death's door. Her left hand lay limply across the brocade coverlet. Faded eyes flickered open.

"I'm sorry," said Bobbie. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"Come in, my dear, come in. Sit yourself down. It's not often an old lady like me gets visitors. Tell me, what brings you to these parts?"

Uppercut snarled softly. Had Bobbie stumbled into the wrong scenario? This looked like a Regency quest. Many quests used common scenarios; it saved space and money.

She was about to leave when she noticed something. The old woman's left hand had come alive, and the fingers were beating a ceaseless tattoo on the bedclothes. She stared, hardly able to believe the evidence of her eyes. That old habit was a giveaway every time, no matter how impenetrable the disguise might otherwise be. The fingers drumming, as though practicing on an invisible piano. It was Peterson lying there!

"Carl," she murmured. "My old adversary. We meet again."

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"Curse you, Drummond!" snarled the other. He leaped from the bed, kicking aside a half-hearted attack by Uppercut, revealing himself as a tall, powerful individual wearing a tux. "It will be the last time, I assure you. Take him, Mustafa!"

Bobbie's arms were seized from behind. Despite her prodigious power she was unable to free herself; her captor had the strength of ten men, not to mention the advantage of surprise. She struggled impotently, cursing. Peterson produced a cord, and in an instant her wrists were securely bound. Mustafa, who proved to be a gigantic, swarthy Turk, held her arm in a vice-like grip.

Stepping back, his equanimity restored, Peterson said smoothly, "This is indeed a fortunate meeting, my dear Drummond. I'm giving a little dinner party for various minor Heads of State and we'll be delighted to have your company. It's a rehearsal for a much bigger game, but I won't bore you with the details since you won't be around to play the next round. What a pity. I've so enjoyed our rivalry in the past."

Propelled by Mustafa, Bobbie was forced up a flight of stairs and along a dim corridor. Peterson paused before a pair of heavy, gilded double doors. "I trust you are going to watch your manners, my friend," he said. "You are about to meet some very influential people. I will untie your wrists so that you may join us at dinner. But," and the menace in his voice chilled Bobbie's blood, "any tricks, and it will be the worse for you."

"You may depend on my good breeding," she heard herself say coldly. "That, I think, is the difference between us, Peterson."

The master criminal flung open the double doors, revealing a brightly lit dining room with a dozen guests in formal attire, already seated. The table was laid with silver cutlery and Waterford crystal, a set Bobbie recognized from several previous quests. The only new item was a huge crystal chandelier instead of the more usual candles.

"Gentlemen," Peterson announced, "I'd like you to meet Captain Hugh 'Bulldog' Drummond, DSO, MC, late of His Majesty's Royal Loamshires. Captain Drummond will be joining us for dinner."

There were two vacant chairs. Peterson seated himself at the head of the table and Bobbie about halfway along, between a spare elderly man whose face was vaguely familiar and a heavily tanned man with an Australian accent. Peterson, toying with his food, watched with thinly veiled contempt as the diners noisily devoured appetizers in the form of barbecued chicken

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wings. Bobbie didn't eat, but tried a couple of wings on Uppercut. They appeared to do him no harm.

Meanwhile Mustafa was distributing finger bowls. Bobbie was about to use hers when she noticed an odd smell. A sickly-sweet smell, somehow familiar. What did it remind her of? And where was it coming from?

Suddenly she jumped to her feet and uttered a mighty shout, freezing the conversation dead with its intensity.

"Don't use the finger bowls, for God's sake! It's death!"

The guests stared at Bobbie in outraged amazement. Peterson laughed quietly.

"What do you mean, death?" said the Australian. "Is this some kind of a joke?"

"Perhaps this will convince you," she said coolly and, taking her finger bowl, she set it down before Uppercut. The mastiff lapped it up with every appearance of healthy thirst.

Bobbie felt herself flushing. Could she, possibly, have made a fool of herself? It would be — she felt herself slipping into her Drummond persona again — damnably bad form. She watched Uppercut for a few seconds more, but the dog remained embarrassingly alive.

"My mistake," she murmured, sitting down quickly.

Mustafa served a cold consommé.

"Lord Charlton," the elderly man introduced himself to Bobbie in a dry murmur. "Fine dog you have, Captain. I had a mastiff myself, once. Had the brute put down. Worrying sheep, don't you know."

The Australian roared with laughter. "I had my mastiff put down because it worried my wife!" Still laughing, he turned to the man on his right. "Why did you have your mastiff put down, Bruce?"

Bobbie listened, annoyed. The discussion dragged on, dealing solely with mastiff euthanasia until the end of the fifth course. "Calves" Stilton had been economizing on dialogue again. If she'd told him once, she'd told him a thousand times. Talk was cheap but effects cost the earth.

Deep in thought, she suddenly awakened to the fact that everyone was standing. Peterson was raising his glass.

"Gentlemen," he intoned, "The King!"

As she automatically raised her own glass, a sickly-sweet stench caught at her nostrils. She stared in horror at the liquid, then at Peterson.

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"Don't drink!" she shouted, then added apologetically, "It's death."

Amid general laughter the guests drained their glasses unscathed, while Peterson regarded her with a thin smile. "Jumpy, are you, Drummond? Nerves a little bit shot? You think this is death? I'll show you death."

And he walked across the room and pulled a lever projecting from the wall.

The chandelier shook and tinkled, and a deadly rain began to fall.

SLIM FERRIS was basically a coward. The notion of death was fascinating when applied to his many enemies, but lost its charm when it became personal and immediate. "Slow down, for God's sake!" he shouted. "You'll kill us both!"

"Life doesn't have much meaning if Bobbie dies."

"Life has all kinds of meaning if she dies! It's us dying I'm worried about. Anyway, how can we save her if we're both dead?"

The logic of this argument got through to Bill, and he eased his foot off the pedal. "Sorry. It's just that there's all kinds of dangers in the Drummond quest that Bobbie doesn't know about. Real dangers as well as simulations. Dangers worthy of 'Bulldog' Drummond."

"Who the hell is this Drummond guy, anyway?"

"'Bulldog' Drummond? He was my childhood idol. The first of the super-heros, really. He was enormously big and strong, yet he could move quietly as a cat. If he got in a jam, and he usually did, he didn't mess around trying to reason his way out of it. He used his fists and his lightning reactions. He didn't know the meaning of the word fear. He was terrifically straight up and well-bred, too, although you never knew who his parents were. He had a group of friends who thought he was God. He drank vast quantities of beer, too."

"He sounds like 'Calves' Stilton."

"He could make split-second decisions. I used to wish I was like Drummond."

Slim eyed him curiously. "So how come 'Calves' programmed the quest? Why didn't you write it yourself?"

Bill hesitated. His secret was bound to come out, now. "Matter of fact, I did."

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"What! But everyone at Axford Proximation thinks 'Calves' wrote it!"

"The truth is, 'Calves' might have looked impressive in the flesh but he wasn't very bright. I used to cover for him a lot. But he'd never admit he had problems, even to himself. He'd been struggling with a minor part of the program for days. I should have noticed and helped him out, but I was getting on with the big stuff. Then suddenly he lost patience, and before I could stop him he'd gone through the door of the Reaper to sort it out personally. I saw him die. Carl Peterson trapped him in a sea-cave on a rising tide. Poor old 'Calves' was dumb to the end. He built himself a raft instead of following a faint breeze of curiously fresh air to its source."

"Jesus."

"Slim, I designed the cave scenario. I killed 'Calves.' I couldn't face the truth and the guilt and the contempt, so I invented the Miss Nude Earth story and I let everyone think he'd done the work on the Drummond quest himself." He drew a deep breath. "My God, I feel better now I've got it off my chest."

There was a long silence between them. The domed city loomed ahead, silver and huge. Eventually Slim said, "It must have been difficult for you programming the quest, having to dream up ways of killing your hero off."

Bill scowled, reliving an old grievance. "I wasn't dreaming up ways of killing off Drummond, not really. I was dreaming up ways of killing off Ted."

"The robot? Why?"

"It was the way Bobbie talked about him. Forever singing his goddamned praises and comparing him with me. 'Ted's so *resourceful*,' he mimicked in a high falsetto. 'Ted's so *decisive*, so *determined*, so *resolute*. Nothing fazes Ted.' Well, I admit I'm not the most dynamic guy in the world, and I got sick of hearing about Ted. One day I caught Bobbie looking at me in a considering way, and do you know what she said? She said Ted was a better man than I. My *God*!"

"Shall we turn round?" suggested Slim hopefully. "Go back to your place and talk it through? Maybe have a beer or two?"

Bill uttered a short laugh. "Ironic, isn't it? Now Bobbie's facing all those dangers I dreamed up for Ted."

"You'll never find her. The Reaper covers ten blocks."

"I'll find her. I know the general location of the Drummond quest; the only problem is, I don't know which alternatives Bobbie might have taken, and I quit working on the program before I'd had all the eyespies installed. So

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we're going to call in at Mindset Visions and pick up our implanted small animals. Then I'm going to send them through the Reaper's wiring ducts. They'll be my eyes. One of them will find Bobbie, soon enough. Then I'll take a short cut in and get her out of there."

"Can you control fifty or so animals at once?" Slim was doubtful.

"I don't need to control them. I just send them scuttling through the ducts in the Drummond area, and I tune into them in rotation."

"We may never get them out again."

"They're expendable!" cried Bill. "Bobbie's all that matters!"

"It's good-bye to the Harrods promotion if you're going to sacrifice all our livestock," objected Slim. "Think, Bill. Is she really worth it? It's Bobbie Axford we're talking about. The woman who compared you unfavorably to Ted."

To Bill's credit, the car only slackened speed for a moment. "Ted's out of the way now. You told me yourself."

"There'll be other Teds."

"Not if Axford Proximation goes under, the way you said it would."

"To save Bobbie you'll have to solve the Drummond quest. So you'll hand Axford Proximation their Harrods promotion on a plate. That means they won't go under. So there'll be many more Teds, all better men than you."

"My God," muttered Bill. "What a quandary."

Bobbie whipped out her collapsible umbrella and extended it briskly.

"What the — " exclaimed Lord Charlton, regarding the chandelier. But he said no more.

All around her the dinner guests were slumping across the table like drunks, but there was no alcohol in the frightful fluid that sprayed from the chandeliers; there was only death. The Australian, more resistant than the others through copious use of suntan oil, was staring at Peterson in horror.

"Why in God's name...?" Then angry blisters erupted on his forehead, and he too fell forward, dead.

Peterson watched from the far side of the room, motionless and silent apart from his habitual soft cough. He suffered from liver fluke, an incurable condition caused by a meal of undercooked escargots many years ago. It was his only known weakness. His cold gaze roamed around the table, coming to rest at Bobbie.

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"So, Drummond, our little game is over. It has been easy, too easy. I like the umbrella; a nice touch. What a pity that it only postpones the inevitable."

"What are you going to do next, you devil?" Bobbie grated.

"Next? Why, I'm going to hold the nations of the world to ransom, what else? I shall stockpile Professor Masterson's excellent fluid, meanwhile giving a few practical demonstrations of its worth. A blimp might be useful for spraying a large gathering at some kind of sporting event; the details are immaterial at this time. When I have convinced people I mean business, I shall start talking about water supplies, and the possibilities of unexpected contamination. Oh, the fluid dilutes very satisfactorily, my dear Drummond. A liter in a reservoir, and...Well, I leave you to dwell on the consequences. Meanwhile, I fear I must leave you. Oh, and by the way. If I were you I'd lift my feet clear of the floor."

So saying, he pulled another lever and, laughing maniacally, hurried from the room.

The deadly rain ceased to fall, yet Bobbie could still hear a splashing sound. It seemed to be coming from the double doors by which she'd entered. As she watched, they burst open and a tidal wave of liquid swept across the floor toward her. She lifted her feet hastily. The characteristic smell of Professor Masterson's poison was almost overpowering. The wave passed under her chair and the level continued to rise rapidly. She climbed onto the chair, balancing precariously.

But this was only a game, wasn't it? The poison was some harmless but evil-smelling junk formulated by that fool "Calves," surely? And the diners were all humanoid robots. So all she had to do was step down from the chair, wade to the door and out of here.

And yet...

It was all so convincing. She had to admit, "Calves" had done a good job. That stuff rising around her chair, it had all the trappings of something dreadful. *One drop on the skin will kill almost instantly*. That was what Professor Masterson had said. But the Professor was a robot, too.

And even if the stuff was merely some kind of sewage, she'd drown in here if she didn't hurry up and get out of this room.

So, it was a question of dipping her toe in and she'd have the answer. One way or another...She tried to do it. She failed. She stood there tottering, scared to touch the liquid, scared not to, indecisive as...As Bill Kilpatrick, for God's sake! What was the matter with her?

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And then something floated into view, something so terrible that any thought of paddling was banished instantly from her mind.

It was the body of a man on a makeshift raft.

He lay face-down on boards roughly lashed together, dressed in the tattered remains of a blue track suit. One of his arms hung into the liquid. And below the elbow of that arm, flesh and bone had disappeared...

He drifted past her chair on the rising waters, and if she hadn't seen the decayed remains of his face, mouth contorted in a dying scream, she'd still have recognized that track suit, once stretched so tightly over a powerful frame.

It was H.K. "Calves" Stilton!

She stared at the blackened face, appalled. What tortures had this man suffered? How long had he been living in the bowels of the Reaper, eating the scraps thrown down the chutes for the piranhas, the rats and the cobras? And what about his reported escape and his marriage to Miss Nude Earth?

Obviously, it had never happened.

It was a lie, put about by that bastard Bill Kilpatrick. And the lie had prevented a search and rescue operation. In effect, Bill had condemned "Calves" to death in the brutal corridors of the Grim Reaper.

Bobbie found herself weeping. "God damn you all to hell, Bill Kilpatrick!" she cried.

And the fluid lapped against the underside of her chair.

"Sure Bobbie's in there," said Rupert easily. "I had her on the screen only a moment ago. Then I lost her."

"Of course you did," snapped Bill. "Didn't you know the Drummond quest was never finished? Most of the alternatives don't have eyespies installed yet."

"Bill's kind of fired up about all this, Rupe," Slim explained. "I told him what you told me about the, uh, financial squeeze and everything, and he reckons Bobbie's up against it in the Reaper. He wants to get her out, fast."

Bill was staring at Rupert. "You've been discussing Axford Proximation's financial affairs with Slim?"

"There's no call to use that tone of voice," said Rupert, hurt. "I wouldn't harm a hair on Bobbie's head. But I've got a sick wife and bills to meet, and you people pay well for information."

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"Do we, Slim? My God, I don't like the sound of this! I never authorized industrial espionage!"

It was Slim's turn to look hurt. "I told you I had spies."

"Well, yes, but anyone can say they have *spies*. It's just a goddamned *saying*. I thought you just meant you'd heard rumors. But this is specific. This is a real spy, in the flesh." Bill regarded Bobbie's personal assistant in disgust. "This is goddamned *Rupert*."

"If it helps at all, he was lying about the sick wife. Actually, he's after Bobbie's body, buying her gifts and such."

"We pay him so he can satisfy his lust?" Bill was outraged.

"That's putting it a bit strong," Rupert objected. "I want you to know I respect Bobbie as a woman."

"You'd better. Because if you don't, I'm going to punch you on the nose!"

"You were worried about Bobbie in the Reaper," Slim reminded Bill hastily.

"Jesus, yes, I was forgetting. Take the raccoons through the main entrance, Slim. Square the programmers and the mechanics. Tell them raccoons are natural burrowers and have them push them into the ducting. Who said I couldn't make decisions? I just hope we're not too late!"

He put on his headset and in due course began to pick up visions of dusty tubing. Soon the raccoons emerged into empty rooms, open fields, rolling oceans, each with their hidden stock of perils awaiting the coming of the next Ted.

On his third rotation through the implanted animals, Bill saw Bobbie balanced on her chair in a flooded room. The level was still rising, and it was clear that she was past the point of rational action. Her mouth was wide open, her face contorted. She was screaming, by the look of her.

He took in the situation at a glance. "Rupert, let me have the pass key to the stock rooms. I'm going to need some equipment."

As the water lapped around the soles of Bobbie's shoes, she heard the creaking of rusty hinges from the door through which the master criminal had gone. Had he relented? Was he returning to cut off the flow of this dreadful liquid?

"Peterson!" she screamed.

"Well, actually, no, it's me, Bobbie." Of all people, it was Bill Kilpatrick, balanced on stilts and wading unsteadily toward her!

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She'd never been so glad to see him. "Bill! Hurry, this stuff's going to come through my shoes in a minute. Turn round and let me climb on your back!"

But he seemed reluctant. "I'm not very good on these stilts. The dinghy would have been better, but I didn't have time to inflate it." He lurched against the table, recovering his balance with difficulty. "I don't think I could carry you. It would be a disaster, really. I just know it."

"So what am I going to do? Stand here and die?"

"Well, what 'Bulldog' Drummond would do, you see, is to grab hold of the back of another chair and move it nearer the door, and step on it. Then he'd move the one you're on now in front of it, and so on. He'd step from one to the other, all the way to the door."

"My God, I never thought of that. That's pretty smart of you, Bill." Dragging the chair from under the slumped Australian, Bobbie made her way steadily to the short flight of steps leading to the door. With a thrill of horror she watched Bill's leg sink up to the knee in the fluid as he dismounted. But he seemed unharmed, although he scrambled onto dry land very quickly. "What is Professor Masterson's poison, anyway?"

"Water, I guess." He looked guilty.

"So why the stilts? Why did I have to go through that performance with the chairs?"

"Because of the piranhas, actually. All the water in the Reaper has piranhas in it; you know that."

They passed through the door, mounted the stairs and found themselves in yet another octagonal room. Bobbie looked from door to door uncertainly. Then from behind the nearest she heard the soft coughing that would destroy Peterson, one day. "Come on," she said, turning the knob.

"No!" He seized her around the waist, drawing her back. "That's not Peterson. My guess is, it's a tape recorder suspended over a pit of cobras — notice the echo?"

He pushed the door with the tip of a stilt so that it swung gently open, and sure enough the floor dropped away into blackness. A faint hissing came to her ears. She shivered and clung to Bill. "I'd have stepped right into that," she murmured. "'Calves' sure had some creepy ideas."

"Sometimes it doesn't pay to make snap decisions," said Bill. "I always like to reason out the possibilities — it comes of being a programmer. And I kind of felt there might be a snake pit there."

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"Sorry. I may have said some hasty things about you in the past, Bill."

He smiled in a masterful manner. "My guess is, Peterson will be in here." And he flung open the opposite door.

They found themselves in a domed circular room, vaulting and empty apart from a massive relief globe of the Earth in the center. The globe must have been at least five meters across, revolving slowly on a steel axis projecting from the floor. A circular platform ran around it at the level of the equator, also supported on steel rods, clearly capable of being raised or lowered.

A tall man dressed in a tux strolled around this platform, keeping pace with the revolutions and examining a small area of the globe with absorbed interest.

"We meet again, Carl, my old adversary," said Bill softly.

Peterson swung around with a snarl of hatred. "Drummond! So you're not dead after all!"

"You've said that many times in the past, Peterson, but you won't be saying it again."

The master criminal recovered his equanimity, chuckling. "Too late, Drummond. Always too late." Still walking to keep up with the rotation of the globe, he indicated a small red button set in a mountainous area. "You see this button? When I press it in approximately ten seconds' time, a measured quantity of Professor Masterson's poison will be released into the Tokyo water supply. A great number of people will die, and the nations of the world will realize I mean business." His voice continued as he strolled around the far side of the globe. "Seven...Six...Five..."

Bobbie watched in wonder as Bill, with reactions worthy of "Calves" Stilton himself, sprang to a control panel on the wall and twisted a knob. The globe began to accelerate. Peterson came into view from the far side, breaking into a brisk trot. "Four...Three..." He began to run. The button moved inexorably away from his outstretched forefinger. With an animal screech of rage, Peterson chased after it. The features of the globe became a whirling blur. Peterson made one more desperate circuit of the platform, then jumped to the floor, panting.

Bobbie recoiled from the naked hatred in his face. "You've beaten me this time, Drummond," he snarled. "But the next time will be different."

"There won't be a next time, Peterson," said Bill coldly. "Die, you foul fiend."

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And he raised his stilt and laid the rubber tip, still wet, against the master criminal's cheek.

Whether the poison was diluted by the copious sweat streaming from Peterson's face, or whether he alone possessed some strange natural immunity, or whether it was merely good theater on the part of the programmer, Bobbie never knew. But it took Peterson several seconds to die. And in those seconds, the normally suave expression went through a hideous transformation until the master criminal was revealed as he really was, something scarcely human, something almost bestial, snarling and slavering and dropping into a crouch, fingers hooked and stretched toward them in a last instinctive compulsion to destroy. Then he collapsed and rolled onto his back and died, face erupting and peeling as the corrosive fluid continued to do its dreadful work.

"Not bad, huh?" said Bill.

Bobbie drew a shaky breath. "Let's get out of here, shall we?" She clung to Bill's arm as they passed through a triumphal arch that had suddenly appeared beyond the globe. Words began to scroll down a huge screen before them. "I've been so wrong about you," she said. "You're quite the man of action, after all. I'm so sorry I called you a vacillating wimp..."

"Well, hell, I don't like to blow my own trumpet — "

But Bobbie wasn't listening. She was staring at the words on the screen, and her expression was undergoing a change not unlike the recent transformation of the late Carl Peterson.

CONGRATULATIONS ON DEFEATING
PETERSON THE MASTER CRIMINAL
PASS THROUGH THIS DOOR OR PRESS F10
TO COLLECT YOUR PRIZE
ANOTHER ADVENTURE SIMULATION BY AXFORD PROXIMATION

And the final, damning words:

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"You!" cried Bobbie. "You programmed the Drummond quest yourself! You told me it was 'Calves' Stilton, but all the time it was you! No wonder

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you showed up so well in there — you already knew all the answers. My God, what a fool I've been!"

"Well, I, uh..."

"And that's another thing! All those lies you told about 'Calves' living happily ever after with Miss Nude Earth, while really the poor guy was dying in there. I'll see you behind bars for that, you bastard! That's why Peterson was so convincing. He's autobiographical!"

"Let me explain about 'Calves.'"

"I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear your voice or see your face ever again. Now just get out of my life, will you!"

So once again Bill Kilpatrick sat in his dingy living room, trying to persuade himself of the virtues of the simple monastic life, wearing his headset as he followed the adventures of McArthur. At the moment the raccoon was trying without success to catch fish in a tide pool, watched by the critical eye of another raccoon.

Simple pleasures, thought Bill determinedly, bored out of his mind.

There came a welcome knock at the door.

Slim Ferris was bubbling with enthusiasm, as ever. "Great news, Bill! Axford Proximation have pulled out of the Harrods Christmas promotion. My spies — that is, Rupert — couldn't record the final stages of the Drummond quest because the eyespies hadn't been installed. Terrific, huh?"

"Bobbie will never forgive me," groaned Bill.

"She didn't seem to blame you when I spoke to her yesterday. In fact she seemed to be talking in terms of a closer relationship between Axford Proximation and Mindset Visions. I even took her a few sample headsets to try out. They've still got half our implanted animals wandering about inside the Reaper."

"It's not just the Harrods thing. She blames me for the death of 'Calves.'"

Some of Slim's ebullience faded. "Too bad about 'Calves.' You know, he was kind of a hero of mine. I often used to wonder how he was doing, up there on Altair with Miss Nude Earth."

"A hologram of Miss Nude Earth. There's a difference." Bill was a stickler for accuracy.

"Yeah. Anyway, I told Bobbie about you sitting helpless at your monitor, watching 'Calves' drown in the cave. It was kind of a catharsis for me, talking about it. I didn't tell her you'd designed the cave."

"How did she take it?"

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Slim considered. "Not bad."

"Well, what did she say, exactly?"

"I guess she said: 'How fortunate for Bill, not having to make a decision.' But then she kind of gulped, and I could see she'd appreciated your, uh, plight."

"I doubt if she'd appreciate anything about me. She thought I was spying on her through McArthur."

"I explained that. I said you loved her and needed to feast your eyes on her now and then. I tell you, you're back in favor."

"I can't think of a single reason why."

"Maybe she loves you. Or more likely," said Slim, always flexible enough to abandon an untenable theory, "Axford Proximation needs bailing out and she sees you as a source of funding."

Bill thought about it, watching idly while McArthur tried unsuccessfully to catch small fish. It was impossible that Bobbie should love him after the fiasco in the Reaper.

But did he still love her? Probably; and an unrequited love fitted in with the notion of a monastic existence. It compounded the gloom in a most satisfactory manner. Yes, he loved Bobbie, but he could never tell her because he couldn't face the rejection. And even if by some amazing chance she did love him, she'd be too goddamned proud to tell him. Stalemate.

"But I can't afford to bail her out," he said unhappily. A close relationship between the two corporations might have softened Bobbie up, given time.

"Of course you can afford it. You're worth millions."

Bill laughed bitterly. "Oh, sure." He waved an arm at his appalling living conditions. "It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"For Christ's sake, you don't have to live in this dump." Slim waved a print-out as a mandrill might wave a prime banana. "I brought the latest figures. Take a look, for once in your life. Bottom line, your net worth. Pretty goddamned good, huh?"

"But..." Bill felt his eyebrows climbing as he regarded the staggering figure. "But I thought...I thought you'd, uh...I mean to say, hell, you can't blame a guy for dipping into the till when temptation's shoved under his nose..."

Slim stared at him. "You thought I'd been creaming off the profits? Jesus, Bill, that hurts. After you trusted me enough to put me in charge, with my record?" His tone became aggressive. "I tell you, I've run a tight ship. I've never touched a penny of your goddamned money."

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Bill began to babble as the figures on the print-out reproached him. "Hell, no, I didn't mean *that*. No, you misunderstand me, Slim. I just felt, you know, development costs...Inflation...New product advertising, all that stuff...I'm just surprised the bottom line's so goddamned *big*, that's all."

"Oh, that's all right, then." Slim regarded him doubtfully. "So what are we going to do about Axford Proximation?"

Bill tried to think about it, his brain still grappling with his unexpected wealth. Axford Proximation and Mindset Visions both sold adventure, basically. Maybe a merger was the way to go. That would bail Bobbie out.

But she was a proud woman. She'd never make the first move. And his very soul shrank at the prospect of approaching *her*. She'd assume he was trying to buy her body.

Jesus Christ, what a dilemma!

Animals didn't have that kind of problem. Idly he watched a pleasant scene through the eyes of McArthur. The raccoon had given up on fishing and was taking a mild interest in the animal on the far side of the tide pool. The two raccoons circled for a moment, then McArthur stopped and the other animal approached, head down, rump waggling. Bill felt himself flush. It was a female, and her intentions were transparent.

One of the ethical problems with Mindset Visions was the ease with which a peculiar pornography could rear its ugly head without warning. And, of course, the headset picked up all kinds of sensory impressions. In some ways, it was all more reprehensible than the killing and eating. This was something he didn't need; the release of base animal instincts when he was trying to consider how to approach the proud yet sensitive, vulnerable and retiring Bobbie...

The female raccoon winked.

He stared.

She winked again, quite deliberately.

He knew those eyes. He knew that wink.

His heart gave a leap of joy...

Casually, he said to Slim. "So Axford Proximation ordered a shipment of headsets, did they? Sounds like a demonstration of good faith, huh? I'll call Bobbie myself and talk about a merger."

"I'll get the number for you," said Slim eagerly.

"No. Not right away," murmured Bill, preoccupied. "Give me five, maybe ten minutes..."

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

Lights come on early in February — artificial lights, that is, making us glad that technology can (occasionally) hold back the darkness. Perhaps February's long nights remind us at the magazine of times when the darkness was accompanied by the eerie flicker of candlelight, or perhaps the chill settles into our bones. No matter what the cause, our February cover stories are always dark, and always chilling.

New writer **Adam-Troy Castro's** "Locusts" is no exception. Adam made quite a sensation a few years ago with his first published story, "Clearance to Land," in *Pulphouse: A Hardback Magazine*, and then again with his first cover story, a tribute to Isaac Asimov, published in *Science Fiction Age*. His second cover story shares more traits with the works of Stephen King than with those of the good Dr. Asimov, but is strong just the same.

To balance the darkness, we add some light: **Ron Goulart** returns to our pages after too long an absence with his own personal "Cure for Baldness." And believe us, the cure is not what you think!

After acknowledging the light and dark sides of the month, we need to acknowledge science as well. As the New Hampshire primary rolls around, we thought we would examine politics in the future, and who better to do that than **Robert Reed**? In "First Tuesday," the President has dinner with all of his constituents, at their own homes, *at the same time*. Of course, even in an age of technological wonders, things are never as simple as they seem.

Also in February, columnists **Rob Killheffer** and **Paul Di Filippo** return. And we will have some more short reviews for your reading pleasure. In future issues, you'll see science fiction from **Alan Brennert**, Martians from **Dave Wolverton**, and horror stories from **Nancy Springer**. **Marc Laidlaw, George Alec Effinger,** and **Kate Wilhelm** will also grace these pages. So keep your subscription current!

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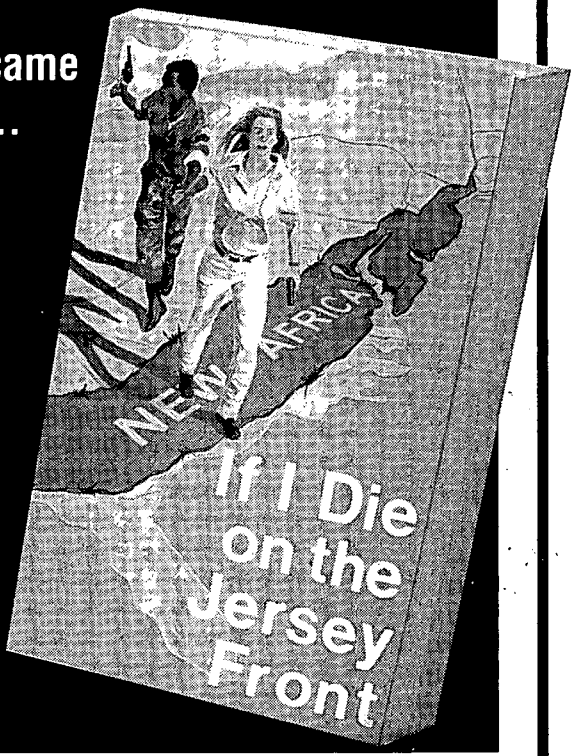
Who Would've Guessed It?

When the end came for Uncle Sam...

it wasn't in a nuclear holocaust but in those seeds of racial hatred sown deep in the past.



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